Benefits of Swimming for Young Children

This case study is based on 25 children's experiences of the Swimming Charter's top-up swimming scheme.

Kristy Howells and Deborah Jarman

Introduction

The Swimming Charter (DfES, 2003) developed a national top-up scheme for children who were struggling to swim 25 metres unaided by the end of primary school. This particular scheme was used for the children within the case school setting who were unable to swim unaided. 25 children (15 girls and 10 boys) undertook 7 consecutive top-up swimming lessons, during one school term, during the Spring. The lessons were taught by the same class teacher and undertaken in the local swimming pool, lasting 45 minutes. The primary school was located in the South East of England and followed the English National Curriculum (DfE 2013). The head teacher and class teacher (who taught the swimming) felt that it was important to offer the top-up national Swimming Charter (DfES 2003) scheme to the children within the school who were not able to swim 25 metres.

The children were from two different classes, so the swimming lessons, not only provided the children with a positive learning environment in which children were able to improve their swimming skills and self-esteem, but also interact with peers they would not normally encounter. Within every lesson the children undertook stroke development, life-saving skills and structured play at the end of the lesson, with an emphasis on enjoying being in the water. The class teacher who taught the swimming lessons had specialised in physical education during their training and completed extra swimming teaching ASA module qualifications. It is recognised that not all primary schools have this level of primary physical education specialists as class teachers (Carney and Howells, 2008).

The children in the swimming sessions did not normally have lessons together, therefore this gave the class teacher the opportunity to consider the impact of not only the top-up scheme on developing swimming skills, but if there were any other potential benefits from using the scheme. The children completed a questionnaire and the 4 areas presented within this report are the children's successfulness at being able to swim 25 metres unaided; well-being and safety; learning outside the classroom, and social interaction and self-esteem.

Successfulness of swimming unaided

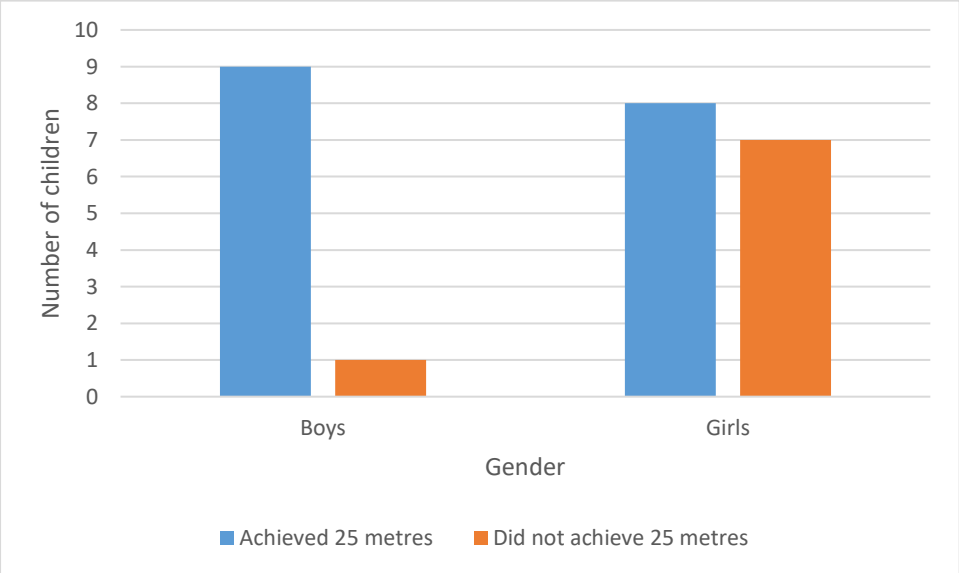

Figure 1.

It was surprising that even after a focused set of 7 top-up lessons that still 8 children (32 per cent) (1 boy and 7 girls) did not successfully achieve the 25m of unaided swimming. These results were similar to those National statistics, previously reported in England, by the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA, 2013) who discovered that a third of children cannot swim, by the time they leave primary school. Of these non-swimmers some (40 per cent) had never had a school swimming lesson, even though it has been part of the physical education compulsory programme National Curriculum (DfE/QCA, 1999 and DfE, 2013). Also in 2014 the numbers of those

not able to swim 25 metres had reached 45 per cent of those aged 7 – 11 and the ASA also reported that 6.6 per cent of English schools did not teach swimming at all during Key Stage 2 (2014).

Well-being and safety

Swimming in particular addresses the health and well-being of the cardio-vascular system and Turley (1997) described swimming as the ultimate 'all-in-one fitness package' where most muscles in the body are utilised. Further to this, other areas of well-being that benefit from swimming for young children, are strength, balance and flexibility, as the gross motor skills are still developing at this age. In particular, good balance is a key skill that must be nurtured when swimming with children. Cook (2004) suggested that it is easier to progress this skill when young, as adult swimmers find it difficult to attain a streamlined body position and consistent hip roll which can cause their body to sink. It is essential that the hips are used to increase power; to do this the body needs to keep them balanced equally with the shoulders to prevent the minimisation of drag.

The children's thoughts about the top-up sessions highlights how valuable they found them. The boys shared that they felt that they 'could now swim for longer'; 'I will be able save myself', whilst the girls idenfitied that 'when I am on holidays I will feel safer' and that 'I'm not nervous about beng around the side of a pool'. They were able to identify the impact and application of the top-up sessions. This application of skills is important as previously the ASA (2013) reported that drowning was the third highest cause of accidental death and that the RoSPA (2013) were concerned that children should have a good knowledge of water safety skills such as hazards of open water, weather conditions and water currents, to ensure that children did not get into difficulties in open water.

Learning outside of the classroom

The opportunity for children to learn outside the classroom (LOTC) is an invaluable part of a child's education, wherever the learning takes place. This prospect to learn away from the classroom setting may allow a child to develop and achieve in an alternative atmosphere that could help their learning and knowledge progress in a different approach (Ofsted, 2008). The children within the top-up sessions had a novel experience as this was not their 'normal' class which allowed them to escape from their classroom setting (Waite, 2011). The class teacher made cross-curricular links back to the classroom within swimming, links to numeracy, literacy and science (ASA, 2008) as she was familiar with the curriculum being a class teacher rather than a non-school swimming teacher. She did this through using Wallis and Binney's (2011) ideas of using problem solving activities and thinking skills during the lesson and or at the play time at the end of the session. She also ensured that the children collaborated with each other during the sessions, which Pickup et al. (2008) suggest increases cognitive skills that can be reassigned back in the classroom.

The children shared that what their experiences of learning outside the classroom the wording of their phrases shows the impact on them. They 'felt happy as even though I am not the best at reading and writing, within the swimming pool I have been the best'. The class teacher identified that some of the children were really focussed in the swimming pool and the children had told her that they enjoyed the 'special lessons' that they had had with her. They also said that they'enjoyed the freedom and that I am proud of reaching 25m'.

Social Interaction and Self-Esteem

During swimming lessons, unintentional learning will take place in the form of development of language and social skills as the learners increase in confidence. McMahon, (1997) viewed that when learning takes place in this kind of social environment where individuals work and learn together that more purpose is given to their knowledge. Therefore there was potential for increases in self-esteem within the top-up focused sessions. Learning together in small groups where children swam together, provided opportunity to utilise teaching though modelling where children were able to learn from observing and encouraging their peers promoting the theories of 'social constructivism' (Vygotsky, 1978). Building on this, confidence through interaction and using applying the newly acquired skills was encouraged further by taking part in structured games using exploratory talk to work as team or problem solve (Mercer, 2000), which occurred at the end of each session.

Howells and Bowen (2016) found that tailored physical activity interventions were able to boost not only academic performance within a case study school setting, but also self-esteem. Within the top-up sessions children reported they really enjoyed the structured play at the end of the lesson where they had time for games and fun within the water. The class teacher was able to see increases in children's self-esteem and their confidence in their own abilities of going under the water and retrieving items, within a game setting. Children

initially who would not put their heads in the water, progressed onto putting their own body under the water and sitting on the bottom of the pool. The children said that they 'liked not being the worst swimmer' ' it has been good taking lots of time over the strokes' 'could we have longer lessons' 'I liked the time for games'. The children also identified that they now 'don't feel embarrassed anymore and I want to go to the next swimming party', and highlighted that they felt 'I can now go on a summer holiday and I think I will be able to make more friends when I go on holidays'.

Conclusion

Overall the top-up swimming programme within the case study school enabled 68 per cent of previously non-swimming children to be able to achieve the 25m unaided swimming requirement in the National Curriculum for England physical education (DfE, 2013). The school has recommended a repetition of the top-up programme again next year to help support those children who were not quite able to achieve the results this year.

Although it was hoped all 100 per cent of the children would be successful, it is important to acknowledge the other benefits of swimming that occurred. They were able to articulate how they felt they had more stamina, and they felt safer. They highlighted how they were now excited about going on holiday to places that had swimming pools or the sea. They now would be willing to go to swimming pool parties which previously they had avoided. The case study school would recommend to others the top-up for children who are unable to swim unaided and to record other skills the children are developing alongside the swimming skills, as for the children these are too very important and these will help encourage lifelong participation.

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