Perceived versus real aquatic competence: The 'Can You Swim' project

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Introduction

These are the Norwegian findings in a larger international project, the 'Can You Swim' project. It is an attempt to answer the question, why do so many known as swimmers get into trouble? Do they over estimate their ability? How well do we perceive our own ability? Of course many who are known as good swimmers are, in fact, poor swimmers and 'known swimmers' are often 'non' swimmers. Aquatic educators have long agreed that the teaching of swimming must include knowledge, attitudes and judgement, as well as skills. What more important knowledge is there than to know our own limits?

Methods

Eighty one university physical education students participated in the study. At the start of their first year, they first answered a questionnaire which included questions about how they perceived what they could do on seven practical swimming skills (e.g. How far can you swim?) They then performed those skills. The perception of ability was scored on a five point scale. The practical skills were then scored. The two data points for all subjects on these two parameters were correlated using the Spearman correlation coefficient. Gender differences were analyzed using the Mann-Whitnet U test.

Results

On the practical tests themselves, the female students out-performed the men significantly on four of the seven tests. The Mann-Whitnet U p-scores for these were a) p=0.03 for floating in deep water, p=0.03 for diving into deep water, p= 0.001 for surface diving, and p=0.001 for rescue towing. On both distance swum and swimming on the back, the women also scored better though not significantly. The men performed best on only distance swum underwater though not significantly.

On perception of ability, there was little if any gender difference. The men perceived themselves to be better overall (they were not) and to be better at surface diving (they were not), neither significant. The only correct perception of the men was that they were poor at floating in deep water. For all subjects, the Spearman correlation coefficient between perceived and real ability was was significant but low.

Discussion

It was not expected that the women would out-perform the men as significantly as they did. It was suspected that the men would perceive themselves to be better than the women. This was not the case as there were few if any gender differences. Lastley, both the men and the women performed more poorly than they themselves thought, and not at a level to be desired in a drowning prevention context.

Conclusions

The subjects in this study were unable to predict their swimming competence as accurately as would be consistent with their needs.

References

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