

Turning the tide: Strategies to engage communities in Surf Lifesaving New Zealand's beach education programmes.

New Zealand has tragic statistics around drowning. In the last 10 years, there have been 386 beach and coastal fatal drownings in New Zealand. Māori, Pasifika and 'other ethnicity' communities are overrepresented in these statistics¹, but perhaps most alarmingly, across all age groups and ethnicities, men are grossly overrepresented². This raises two important questions: why are we seeing such imbalances, and what can we do to improve the way we engage with different groups?

New Zealand has twice the level of drownings per capita than Australia (SLSNZ, 2022). Despite this, water safety programmes are struggling with engagement. Surf Lifesaving New Zealand (SLSNZ) is an organisation that is responsible for ensuring the safety of individuals at the beach. They deliver the Surf Lifesaving Beach Education Programme, an initiative which is delivered to primary school-aged children with the goal of educating these children about the basics of being safe in and around water when at the beach.

This essay considers the current approach to educating young people about water safety at the beach, why we see disparities in ethnicity and gender, and explores alternative methods suggested in academic literature to engage both young men and different ethnic communities.

Why do we have this issue?

Surf Lifesaving New Zealand, like many sport and recreation organisations in Aotearoa, has predominantly utilised a western world view in their delivery of beach education programmes. While they have been instrumental in keeping New Zealanders safe on the beaches, and rely on the support of a volunteer network, could a more diverse perspective help them engage with those populations that are most vulnerable? A western world view means that issues such as colonisation, different cultures lifestyles and masculinity have been overlooked when implementing these engagement techniques in the past.

¹ 96 of the 386 fatal drownings are those of Māori ethnicity. The average fatality rate for Māori drownings is 2.64 per 100,000 people. Compared to NZ European ethnicity whose average fatality rate is 0.55 per 100,000 people.

² Males equate for 87% of fatal drownings that have occurred in NZ over the past 10 years. The breakdown of male drownings when looking at ethnicities is; NZ European (81% male, 19% female), Māori (96% male, 4% female), Asian (86% male, 14% female), Pasifika (100% male, 0% female), Other (86% male, 14% female). Last year males accounted for 89% of the total fatal drownings.

The process of colonisation discounted Māori and tikanga Māori as inferior and abnormal. Due to this view of Māori during the time of colonisation Māori people were limited access to privileges enjoyed by Europeans. Hokowhitu (2004) argues that due to this pre-conception of Māori during colonisation, Māori are automatically disadvantaged when it comes to education, as education post colonisation was a privilege. Along with understanding the Māori heritage we also have to understand the cultural significance of the ocean to Māori and Pasifika people. Studies have shown (Te Ara, n.d., Wikaire, 2016) that Māori see the ocean as the foundation or sustainer of life and culture with traditional Māori culture and world views being based around the water. Māori's world view is that freshwater comes from the splitting of Ranginui (sky father) and Papatūānuku (earth mother) where these two gods share a whakapapa with Māori people. Māori believe that these elements are related and hold their own life force (mauri) which must continue in order to promote life (Ministry for the environment, 2020). The ocean to Māori historically has been vital as a source of resources. Māori still value water as a source of resources for food such as fish and shellfish. Other studies have shown (Harrison, 2014) that the ocean was once a highway and a playground for their ancestors. Their ancestors travelled across dangerous seas, overcoming a variety of challenges to seek a better life for their future whanau.

The other point we need to consider is the gendered dimension to Surf Lifesaving New Zealand's statistics. Historically, females have been excluded from certain parts of life. Sports cultures were quite often created "by and for men," (Wheaton, 2000) excluding females from participating in sports. Connell (1995) explains that this has served as symbolic proof of men's superiority and right to rule. As such, to be masculine is "to embody competence" (Connell, 1983, p.27). Even when they may not be confident swimmers, this 'embodied competence' leads to men 'over-reaching' and getting into trouble in the water. Studies show (Utah women & leadership project, 2015) that men consistently rate their performance as high on the tasks that they carry out. Men also promote themselves in certain areas of their life even if their actual level of performance is lower than their peers. When specifically looking at outdoor activities, men are more likely to take risks than females due to their lower perceived risk of the activity. In a Surf Lifesaving context, we see more males swimming in bigger surf, jumping off rocks and fishing off rocks without a lifejacket. Further literature (Pawlowski, 2008) discusses that in mixed sex groups men tend to have a lower risk-taking behaviour compared to when they are in a single sex group with all males. It is not just a case of men are riskier than women, but it is a group influence where masculinity feeds of others creating a toxic culture that leads to more risk taking. This risk-taking behaviour often leads to men underestimating the risk level of an activity and overestimating their abilities. The costal safety report reflects this through

showing that in all coastal activity's men believe they are experienced enough to take some risks when participating in their coastal activity compared to females³. Males were also more likely to take risks and less likely to follow safety practices, while females were less likely to take risks and more likely to follow safety practices. In this case men are underestimating the risk level of swimming in rough conditions and overestimating their abilities in these rough conditions.

So, what are some ways that SLSNZ could connect better with these groups?

What could we do differently?

There are a range of techniques that the Surf Lifesaving beach education programme could implement to help engage those participants from culturally diverse communities. These techniques include ensuring participants feel like they belong in an environment, ensuring that the culture is valued in the teaching organisation, breaking down and challenging stereotypes and using relationship-building to educate beachgoers.

A sense of belonging

We all learn in different ways, and our culture can be a major influence in what we deem important. However, a common theme amongst all cultures (Webber et al., 2020 and Marker & Zimmerman, 2008) is that we all want to belong somewhere or to something. Students are more likely to engage in learning and experience greater school success when they feel like they belong. This is illustrated when they see their realities reflected in the curriculum, conversations, and interactions of their schooling. New Zealand's education system in schools follows a strict curriculum with all New Zealand schools following the same system. When a different approach to the curriculum is taken (such as using a Treaty-responsive practice curriculum where local Iwis had input into how different subjects could be taught bringing in Māori learnings and local problems), not only were Māori male students more engaged in learning, participating and contributing to discussions, they also displayed a new level of knowledge and skills (Webber et al., 2020).

³ Swimming/Wading (64% male, 48% female), Surfing (66% male, 46% female), Watercraft (72% male, 38% female), Rock fishing (70% male, 46% female), Land-based fishing (63% male, 57% female), Boating (47% male, 24% female), snorkelling (52% male, 51% female) and PWC (51% male, 13% female).

Traditional practices such as dances, songs, cuisine, and body markings are an important and unique aspect of one's culture. As Rata (2012) and Whitinui (2008) explain, when Te ao Māori is understood and valued by the organisation Māori communities are more likely to engage and be successful in the content. Based on this literature SLSNZ should link in Māori traditions such as Kapa haka as Māori participants are more likely to participate, learn and achieve more consistently. Or, by incorporating cultural practices such as waka paddling and fishing, they could create opportunities for local communities to engage in water safety that has cultural significance to them (Jackson et al., 2016). Provided with a culturally responsive learning environment, Māori communities are more likely to feel like they belong. Kai gathering for many communities is also an important part of their culture and a way to provide for their whanau. Of the 2.1 million coastal activity participants in 2021/22, 38% were kai gathering for food (SLSNZ, 2022). If we can engage these groups, then we can teach safe practices around how they can stay safe while gathering food from the ocean.

It is also important to see people like yourself reflected in these initiatives if they hope to be successful. Growing up everyone looks up to a role model, whether that person is a well-known athlete, author, actor or parent. We look up to role models, as they are someone that we aspire to be and whom we can learn from. Boyd (2014) illustrates that Beach education participants who are from culturally diverse communities have very few role models that represent them. Therefore, SLSNZ needs to make sure that they include community members that are representative of the place in the implementation and governance of beach education programmes.

Building relationships

Building relationships is just as important as creating a sense of belonging. If educators do not make an effort to build relationships with the groups and individuals they are educating, we cannot expect to get a high level of engagement from participants.

As previously discussed how an individual or a group learns determines how the teacher/instructor should engage them. Another factor to how an individual or group learns is also dependent on the specific engagement techniques used dependent on the learning setting and context. Studies have shown (Kamstra et al., 2023) that when learning about drowning prevention at the beach, the best engagement technique to use between lifeguards and the public is relationship building. This is because members of the public feel like they are able to have a friendly and reflective discussion about their experiences of risk, which allows members of the public to then learn from the lifeguards

more about the beach risk which has a spillover effect on different areas the member of the public may swim because they have learnt how the conditions influence the flagged area.

Surf Lifesaving New Zealand also needs to ensure that their own members are educated around different cultures and how to engage with these cultures, providing an appealing environment. Literature shows (Ikpeze, 2016) that culture provides the foundation and template for all human activities, interactions and understanding. Therefore, influencing how instructors and participants think, believe and behave in an environment. This is supported with further research (Schech et al., 2016) that building meaningful relationships start with an endeavour to form a relationship that embraces cultural differences through investing time and effort to break down the stereotypes and differences through learning about the culture's history and traditional customs. Therefore, it is vital for Surf Lifesaving to ensure that their beach education instructors along with all Lifeguards understand different cultures to implement water safety programmes successfully through building relationships. Building relationships through embracing cultural differences will make language less of a barrier. New Zealand beaches over summer are hot spots for tourists, so being able to build relationships is important so that lifeguards can communicate through body language and key words to those who do not speak English.

However, the literature shows that there are other factors that contribute to these high drowning statistics. Studies show (Corlett, 2022, Phillips, 2022) that lack of water skills education for children, people not staying up to date with weather and ocean conditions, overestimation of the power of the ocean and the lack of focus on educating a whole whanau on water safety are all factors that contribute to high drowning statistics that need to be further researched. Surf Lifesaving New Zealand needs to ensure that within their beach education programmes they are educating all participants about how to know what weather conditions make the beach more dangerous, along with teaching basic wave types so that participants learn what wave types are more dangerous.

Conclusion

Overall, Surf Lifesaving New Zealand's National Beach and Coastal Safety Report 2022 highlighted that the drowning rates in New Zealand are influenced by both ethnicity and gender with Māori communities having a higher drowning rate per year compared to other ethnicities in New Zealand along with Males having higher fatal drownings than their Female counter parts. To engage Māori participants in water safety programmes Surf Lifesaving New Zealand, need to ensure that Māori feel connected to their culture and community while integrating relationship-building techniques so that

participants fully understand the concept of water safety. Surf Lifesaving New Zealand should also ensure that they continue to eliminate stereotypes, to help foster a safe and inclusive environment. If we continue to apply the status quo, in twenty years, we will be having the same discussion around how shocking our drowning statistics are, especially for our young Māori and Pasifika men. We need to find ways of engaging our young men across all ethnicities. The challenge is large, but if Surf Lifesaving implements some of the suggestions identified in the research above, perhaps we can turn the tide on a major issue.

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