Pedagogical resources
AQUATIC ACTIVITIES

SWIMMING OUTSIDE THE NORM: A GUIDE TO AQUATIC EDUCATION WITH A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Luciano Geymonat

February 16, 2026

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Aquatic education should be inclusive and sensitive to the diversity of bodies, genders, and identities, promoting pedagogical practices that value free expression, respect individuals' names, and create safe, equitable, and enriching spaces for all children.

Introduction

Water activities have historically been associated with play, enjoyment and physical fitness. However, they also constitute educational spaces where norms and expectations around gender, sexuality and bodies are reproduced, often inadvertently. From the organisation of games, the distribution of spaces, or the choice of characters and stories, practices are configured that reinforce binary models (conceptions that reduce gender to two fixed and opposing categories, male and female) and cisheteronormative models (people who identify with the sex assigned at birth and are heterosexual).

The experience in the water is permeated by cultural codes and specific ways of reading and valuing bodies. In this context, many children are invited to participate in a game in which the rules of gender are already predefined, limiting which movements, expressions, and ways of being in the water are desirable. This tends to make those who do not conform to the dominant norm invisible or exclude them, restricting their full participation and freedom of expression.
The use of changing rooms, traditional "pirate and mermaid" representations, and expected ways of moving and expressing oneself reproduce gender stereotypes that limit creativity and enjoyment. Thus, the aquatic session becomes not only a space where aquatic skills are transmitted, but also a place where certain ways of inhabiting the body and expressing oneself are legitimised. Various studies carried out in Latin America have pointed out that schools operate as a device that regulates bodies, knowledge and subjectivities (Vinacur et al., 2019).

The incorporation of sex education and diversity approaches into education systems has faced persistent resistance, precisely because it challenges deeply rooted beliefs, institutional traditions, and social mandates linked to masculinity and femininity.

This tension is particularly evident in the lives of children and adolescents whose gender identities or expressions challenge hegemonic norms. Regional studies and official data have shown that these populations face higher levels of discrimination and exclusion in schools, affecting their well-being, their sense of belonging and their right to a safe education. In this context, ambiguities also persist in the role of teachers, linked to a lack of specific training, fear of families' reactions, or the absence of institutional frameworks that legitimise these interventions (Gelpi & Montes de Oca, 2022; Vinacur et al., 2019).

Considering this situation, this educational resource is proposed as a tool for rethinking aquatic teaching practices from an inclusive and sensitive perspective. It seeks to provide elements to denaturalise inherited ways of organising sessions, questioning the collective construction of femininity and masculinity, and opening the game to include other bodies, identities and ways of inhabiting the water.

From this approach, aquatic education can be transformed into a space of freedom, enjoyment and safety for all children, promoting a pedagogy that not only teaches swimming, but also teaches how to live together with respect, diversity and tenderness.

Principles for designing an aquatic session with a gender perspective

Naming to include. Language is a fundamental tool in the construction of identities. Far from being neutral, the way we name things creates realities: it can reproduce dynamics of invisibility and exclusion or, conversely, enable new forms of existence and recognition. The sources analysed (OEI, 2024) agree that the conscious use of non-sexist or non-binary language (as well as the omission of gender when it is not necessary) makes it possible to make silenced identities visible and question power hierarchies. Respecting the names and pronouns of each child, as well as opening the classroom to diverse language, represents an ethical and pedagogical decision that recognises diversity and contributes to building fairer and more equitable educational environments where no one is left out.

Voices and silences. The dynamics of speech and silence in the classroom are not random but

are influenced by power relations. Various studies (Alvarez-García et al., 2014; MEC, 2024) warn that silence has operated as a pedagogical device in favour of invisibility, through which certain experiences, identities and knowledge are omitted or relegated. Not naming or avoiding certain topics conveys implicit messages that affect the subjective construction of childhood, reinforcing hierarchies and normalising exclusions. Observing who speaks, who remains silent and under what conditions certain voices are legitimised becomes a key tool. Recognising and problematising these silences allows us to dismantle naturalised logics, open to more equitable participation and build spaces where all children can express themselves, be heard and recognised.

Roles, bodies and movement. Educational practices, particularly sports, have been spaces for controlling bodies and assigning roles based on gender expectations. These regulations are expressed in the organisation of groups, the distribution of tasks, the correction of movements and the transmission of bodily and expressive stereotypes that limit freedom and creativity.

Shifting the focus towards bodily and expressive diversity, reviewing inherited ways of organising games and activities, enabling the free choice of roles and recognising unique ways of moving, allows us to construct proposals where difference is not an exception, but a constituent part of learning.

Questioning practice. Incorporating a gender perspective into our practices involves critically examining ourselves. This requires questioning inherited knowledge, which often unintentionally reproduces stereotypes and reinforces inequalities.

Small changes in discourse and in the presentation of tasks can create significantly more inclusive environments that are perceived as safe places to be and to be in the water. This continuous review of the pedagogical task allows us to build more sensitive and fair practices.

As an invitation, here are some questions to challenge our practices:

- Do I offer diverse forms of expression (words, silence, gestures, movement) or always the same ones?
- Whose voices are heard most often and whose are silenced?
- Who do I make invisible when I do not offer roles, characters or forms of participation that are not
- associated with gender?
- How could I re-evaluate the organisation of space, the formation of groups or the assignment of roles?
- Do I correct movements based on implicit gender norms, or do I enable and celebrate bodily and expressive diversity?

These questions do not seek definitive answers, but rather to spark ongoing reflection.

Our practices can thus become a powerful space for rethinking bodies, identities, and ways of relating to one another. Below are some examples that can guide us in building safe and caring

spaces that protect the expression of all identities.

Common practices and possible adjustments

Common practice	Adjustment
Associating colours, objects or accessories with a specific gender	Offering diverse materials without prior assignments or associated judgments, enabling each child to choose freely
Correcting gestures, postures or movements based on gender expectations	Accompanying movements based on functionality, enjoyment and safety, valuing expressive diversity
Validating only those who speak loudly or expose themselves	Enable different modes of participation: speech, gesture, body language, active silence
Fixed representations	Propose open characters, without predefined gender roles, allowing each child to choose how and who they want to be
Using only the generic masculine form or assigning nicknames based on gender	Use names, respect pronouns, and omit gender when not necessary
Rows and teams grouped by gender	Form mixed rows and teams, organised without gender distinction and with equal participation, or allow children to group themselves freely according to their preferences
Use of traditional stories without critical review	Adapt stories to address family diversity, identity, and new representations, considering all childhoods
Content without a gender perspective	Incorporate female and diverse role models into symbolic play, expanding the possibilities for identification

Conclusion

If we recognise diversity as a fundamental human characteristic, we assume responsibility for creating spaces where all children can feel safe, valued and accepted for who they are and how they interact with water. By implementing this guide, we not only teach skills in the aquatic environment, but also coexistence and respect, turning each session into an educational experience that opens doors and gives rise to the authenticity of all children.

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