Pedagogical resources
AQUATIC ACTIVITIES

WHEN PROTECTING IN THE WATER ALSO MEANS LETTING CHILDREN EXPLORE IT: FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE IN AQUATIC EDUCATION

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The teaching and learning process in the aquatic environment is complex, primarily due to the belief systems surrounding fear and safety, autonomy and responsibility, and the distinction between what is the child's responsibility and the adult's role. It is important to move from beliefs to knowledge and to be aware that the way in which the learner's experience is facilitated shapes their learning and level of aquatic competence. You have to experiment to understand; you have to act and make decisions to learn.

Introduction

The teaching and learning process in the aquatic environment is deeply influenced by educational beliefs regarding fear, safety, learner autonomy, and the role adults should play in the educational experience. These pedagogical decisions guide the teaching of content specific to initiation and learning in the aquatic environment. This essay reflects on how to strike a pedagogical balance between ensuring the learner's safety and allowing them to explore the aquatic environment to develop their own competence.

The aquatic environment as a learning context

The aquatic environment is one of the most unique educational settings in which human learning can take place. Unlike other teaching contexts, water profoundly alters the usual conditions of movement, balance and body awareness. Floating, breathing, orienting oneself or moving through the water requires a reorganisation of one's relationship with one's own body and with the environment. Every interaction with the aquatic environment involves interpreting what is happening, adjusting one's actions and progressively building new ways of relating to the water.

In this sense, learning in the water is not merely about acquiring technical skills for movement or buoyancy. Experiences in the aquatic environment also influence the way people perceive their surroundings, manage uncertainty and gradually build the confidence to interact with it. Early experiences in the water can encourage curiosity, exploration and enjoyment, but they can also lead to insecurity or dependence if the educational conditions do not allow the learner to understand what is happening and develop their own responses to the demands of

the environment. These early experiences are crucial because they shape the way the learner interprets the aquatic environment, builds their relationship with the water and develops their level of aquatic competence over time (Moreno-Murcia & Ruiz, 2019).

For this reason, aquatic education cannot be understood solely as a process of imparting motor skills. Rather, it is an educational process in which pupils learn to interpret an environment with specific characteristics, to recognise their own scope for action, and to progressively develop forms of interaction that are increasingly attuned to the aquatic environment. The way in which learning experiences are organised in this context is therefore decisive for the kind of relationship people will build with water throughout their lives.

This perspective ties in with recent proposals advocating a respectful approach to aquatic education, in which care does not consist of eliminating difficulty, but rather of designing educational contexts that allow the learner to become actively involved in their process of adapting to the aquatic environment (Fonseca-Pinto et al., 2024).

Learning in the water: adaptation, independence and competence development

Learning in an aquatic environment involves undergoing a process of gradual adaptation to an environment with physical properties that differ from those of the terrestrial environment, which requires a reorganisation of movement patterns, breathing, balance and spatial orientation. In this context, learning is not limited to reproducing techniques, but involves interpreting and discovering the conditions of the environment, experimenting with responses and adjusting one's actions to its demands. From this perspective, the development of aquatic competence is understood as a process through which pupils learn to interact with water in an increasingly autonomous, safe and effective manner, integrating not only motor skills but also the ability to perceive, understand and make appropriate decisions, through experiences that encourage exploration, the recognition of their potential and the gradual building of confidence. The development of this competence requires educational experiences in which pupils can explore the aquatic environment, identify their own possibilities for action and progressively develop confidence in all their abilities.

Various studies in the fields of education and human development have highlighted that meaningful learning occurs when individuals have the opportunity to face challenges that require adaptation, interpretation and the regulation of their actions (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). In the aquatic environment, these conditions take on particular significance, as the setting naturally presents situations of uncertainty that encourage exploration, adjustment of body posture, reorganisation of breathing or changes in direction of movement. In this sense, **the challenge should not be seen as a negative element within the educational process, but rather as a necessary condition for the development of learning.** When pupils face situations presenting a level of difficulty commensurate with their abilities, they can experiment, try out different solutions and progressively develop more effective ways of interacting with their environment. Such experiences foster the development of self-confidence, a sense of competence and the ability to self-regulate one's own actions in the

aquatic environment.

In the field of motor learning, it has been noted that competence acquisition is optimised when the learner faces challenges tailored to their skill level, thereby enabling the integration of the sensory and motor information required to consolidate learning (Guadagnoli & Lee, 2004).

However, for this process to take place, the challenge must arise within an educational context that adequately regulates the conditions of the experience. When the difficulty is excessive or arises without pedagogical mediation, it can generate fear or paralysis. Conversely, when situations requiring adaptation are systematically eliminated, learning may be impoverished and the development of water competence limited. The pedagogical issue, therefore, does not lie in avoiding difficulty, but in understanding how to regulate it so that it becomes a meaningful learning opportunity.

Research on resilience suggests that experiences of moderate difficulty, supported by appropriate supportive contexts, promote the development of internal coping resources and strengthen the perception of personal competence (Seery et al., 2010). In the aquatic environment, this principle is particularly relevant, as adapting to the environment involves learning to respond to small variations in buoyancy, balance or breathing.

The pedagogical dilemma in aquatic education

In the practice of aquatic education, it is common to observe that educational intervention falls between two seemingly opposing positions. On the one hand, there is a tendency to overprotect pupils, seeking to avoid any situation that might cause discomfort, uncertainty or difficulty whilst interacting with the water. From this perspective, the educator tends to constantly anticipate the student's actions, continuously support their body or intervene before any loss of balance occurs. Although this approach is often justified on safety grounds, it can also limit students' ability to explore the aquatic environment, interpret their own sensations and develop autonomous responses to the demands of the environment.

When educational intervention is aimed solely at avoiding any difficulties, the pupil may come to experience the water as a space in which their actions are constantly dependent on the presence of an adult, thereby compromising an accurate assessment of their own sense of competence. Instead of learning to understand the aquatic environment and adapt their behaviour to the conditions it presents, pupils may develop a relationship of dependency on the educator, who acts as a constant guarantor of stability and control of the situation, or fail to appreciate the characteristics of the environment because the need for vigilance is met by the adult. In such contexts, learning may be reduced to the repetition of guided tasks, without the learner having the opportunity to interpret what is happening or to progressively build a more autonomous relationship with the water. In the second case, the guided activity becomes a challenge to respect, as the learner seeks only to do what they feel like doing.

Educational research has shown that when adults systematically remove difficulties or anticipate the resolution of challenges, learners have fewer opportunities to develop self-regulation, confidence and a genuine sense of competence, as overprotection is associated with higher levels of dependence and a lower perception of efficacy in learning contexts (Schiffrin et al., 2014).

At the other end of the spectrum, there are also educational approaches that view learning in an aquatic environment as a process that must arise from direct exposure to the challenge. Under this logic, it is considered that pupils should face the demands of the water as soon as possible in order to adapt to them, in the belief that the experience itself will generate the necessary responses. Nevertheless, when the challenge arises without adequate pedagogical guidance, the learning process can be affected by pressure, fear or a loss of control over the

situation.

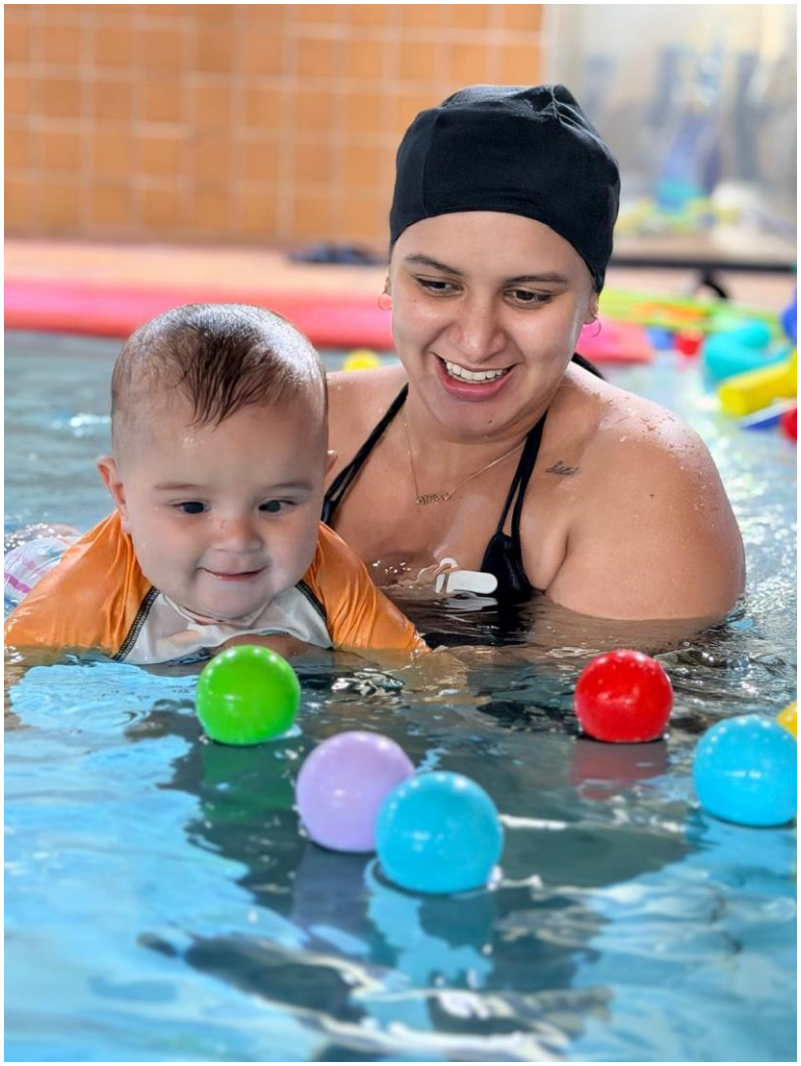
These two ways of understanding educational intervention reflect a common dilemma in aquatic education: how to ensure safe conditions in an environment characterized by uncertainty, while at the same time without avoid learners from having the opportunity to explore, experiment, and develop their own responses to the constraints of the environment.

The role of the educator in regulating aquatic learning

In this context, the role of the educator takes on crucial importance. Teaching in an aquatic environment does not consist solely of setting exercises or leading activities in the water, but rather of planning and organising educational conditions that enable pupils to interact with their surroundings, interpret what is happening, and develop responses that are increasingly tailored to the demands of the environment. The teacher's role is therefore not to constantly take over the student's actions or to control their every movement, but rather to regulate the context in which the learning experience takes place.

From this perspective, the educator acts as a mediator between the student and the aquatic environment. Their role consists of designing situations that present comprehensible challenges, observing how students respond to these situations, and progressively adjusting the conditions of the task to encourage new forms of adaptation. Rather than eliminating the uncertainty inherent in the aquatic environment or imposing predetermined responses, the pedagogical intervention aims to support the process through instructions, questions, variations in the task and adjustments to the context that facilitate understanding of the experience.

This role of the educator as a facilitator of the learning environment, rather than a substitute for the child's own actions, has been linked to higher levels of motivation, enjoyment and persistence in early childhood aquatic learning (Minkels et al., 2023). From this perspective, the educator ceases to act as a "rescuer of discomforts" and becomes an "architect of educational challenges" that enable pupils to explore the aquatic environment progressively. Their pedagogical intervention is based on the ability to observe, wait and adjust the context so that the pupil can become the true agent of their own learning.



From this perspective, aquatic education can be understood as a process of pedagogical mediation in which the educator designs learning environments that encourage exploration, regulate the level of challenge and promote the progressive development of aquatic competence (Moreno-Murcia, 2026).

In aquatic education, therefore, "protecting" does not mean avoiding any situation involving uncertainty or difficulty, but rather creating conditions in which pupils can gradually engage with the aquatic environment, with pedagogical support and scope for exploration. The pedagogical issue is not a choice between protecting or letting go, but understanding how to create conditions in which the learner can explore, face the challenge and build confidence in the water without being replaced or forced by adult intervention.

From this perspective, the following essay reflects on the pedagogical balance between protection and autonomy in aquatic education. Through an analysis of different forms of teaching intervention, it raises the need to understand the role of the educator as a regulator of the learning context, capable of accompanying learners in the process of progressively discovering, interpreting and inhabiting the aquatic environment.

This reflection ties in with recent proposals advocating a respectful approach to aquatic education, in which care does not consist of eliminating difficulty, but rather of designing safe contexts that allow the learner to become actively involved in their own process of discovery and adaptation to the aquatic environment (Fonseca-Pinto et al., 2024).

“Greenhouse” aquatic education

In some aquatic teaching contexts, there is a tendency to organise the learning experience under very strict controlled conditions. The educator’s intervention is aimed at avoiding any situation that might cause uncertainty, loss of balance or discomfort among the learners. Under this approach, interaction with water takes place in highly protected environments, where the adult intervenes constantly to anticipate or correct any response that deviates from what is expected.

This type of approach can be compared to what might metaphorically be called “greenhouse” aquatic education. In a greenhouse, environmental conditions are carefully regulated to prevent variations that might affect plant growth. Similarly, in certain educational contexts, an attempt is made to control every element of the aquatic experience to ensure constant stability and safety.

Although this approach is usually motivated by a legitimate desire to protect pupils, it can also lead to unintended educational consequences. When pupils interact with water in an overly controlled environment, they may come to rely constantly on adult intervention to maintain

their balance or to orient themselves in the aquatic environment. Instead of progressively developing the ability to interpret their surroundings and adapt their actions to the conditions of the water, pupils may become accustomed to acting only under the direct supervision of the educator.

In such situations, learning may be reduced to the repetition of guided tasks, in which the pupil reproduces previously instructed movements without fully understanding the conditions that make them necessary. Interaction with the aquatic environment becomes predictable and controlled, limiting opportunities to explore, experiment and discover new ways of adapting.

From the perspective of developing water skills, this type of experience may prove insufficient. Learning to interact with water necessarily involves dealing with slight variations in posture, buoyancy, breathing or spatial orientation. When these variations are systematically removed from the educational experience (through repetitive exercises, the use of unsuitable equipment, or manipulation by the teacher or family in the case of babies), pupils may find it difficult to transfer what they have learnt to real-life situations where the environment is not completely controlled. Thus, the intention to protect may end up limiting the learner's ability to build an autonomous relationship with the aquatic environment. Excessive pedagogical control not only reduces the capacity for exploration but may also prevent learners from developing confidence in their own ability to act within the water.

Various studies in the fields of sport and motor learning have shown that training contexts characterised by excessive pressure or unrealistic demands can lead to dropout, demotivation or rejection of the activity (Soares & Carvalho, 2023). In the context of aquatic education, these experiences can result in a negative relationship with water that hinders future learning.

Misunderstood toughness

At the opposite end of the spectrum from "greenhouse" aquatic education lie pedagogical approaches that view learning in the water as a process that must take place primarily through direct exposure to challenges and, at the very limit, to the maximum risk of drowning, on the grounds of preventing it. From this perspective, adaptation to the aquatic environment is considered to occur when pupils are confronted as early as possible with demanding situations that require them to respond independently to environmental conditions. This type of approach is often based on the idea that difficulty strengthens learning and that early exposure to challenges promotes adaptation. In some contexts, this interpretation translates into educational practices in which pupils are faced with tasks that

momentarily exceed their current abilities, with the expectation that the experience itself will generate the necessary responses. However, when the challenge arises without adequate pedagogical support, the learning process can be influenced by emotions such as fear, rejection, insecurity or a loss of control over the situation. Rather than encouraging exploration and gradual adaptation to the aquatic environment, such experiences can trigger defensive responses that hinder the development of a positive relationship with water.

In such cases, the learner does not necessarily learn to understand the aquatic environment or to interpret the demands of the situation. Rather, they learn to react to an experience they perceive as threatening or overwhelming. The adaptation that occurs under these conditions may be more a form of resistance than a process of comprehensive learning. Furthermore, this type of approach can lead to a reductionist interpretation of the educator's role. If learning is considered to depend primarily on direct exposure to the challenge, pedagogical intervention runs the risk of being limited to setting demanding tasks without paying sufficient attention to the emotional and cognitive conditions in which pupils experience the aquatic environment.

From an educational perspective, challenge may be a fundamental element of learning, but its pedagogical value depends on how it is integrated within a context that allows the experience to be understood and adaptation to the environment to be progressively regulated.

Between these two positions lies the need to understand aquatic instruction from a different perspective, in which learning arises from the progressive interaction between the learner, the environment and pedagogical mediation.

The aquatic environment as a real learning space

Between overprotection and indiscriminate exposure to challenges lies a third way of understanding aquatic instruction. This perspective is based on the recognition that the aquatic environment is, by its very nature, one characterised by variability, uncertainty and

constant demands for adaptation. Learning does not consist of eliminating these characteristics from the environment, nor of exposing pupils to them without pedagogical guidance, but rather of progressively supporting the process through which the pupil learns to interpret them and act within them.

From this point of view, the aquatic environment can be understood as a real learning space, in which pupils can experience different forms of interaction with water, explore possibilities for movement and adjust their responses to the conditions of the environment. Rather than seeking absolute control of the situation or relying exclusively on exposure to challenge, educational intervention is geared towards regulating the conditions in which the experience takes place.

In this process, the educator designs situations that present understandable challenges for the pupils, introduces variations that broaden the scope for action, and guides the experience through observation, instructions and pedagogical adjustments. In this way, learning does not occur solely through the repetition of movements or exposure to demanding situations, but through the opportunity to experiment, interpret and reorganise actions in relation to the aquatic environment.

This approach recognises that water safety is not built solely by eliminating risk, but through the progressive development of the ability to interpret the environment and act adaptively (aquatic competence). When learners have the opportunity to explore the aquatic environment within regulated pedagogical conditions, they can build a more autonomous, safe and comprehensive relationship in and with the water. In this way, aquatic education is geared towards a balance between care and challenge. The educator's role is not to completely control the learner's experience or to impose situations requiring immediate adaptation, but rather to create conditions that allow learning to emerge from meaningful interaction with the environment. Granting this space does not mean the teacher can relax their attention, become distracted by their colleagues or forget the approach. In reality, this type of pedagogical approach demands commitment, reflection and a conscious approach.

This perspective aligns with pedagogical approaches that view education as a process of support attuned to the learner's pace, in which challenge is integrated within a framework of care and respect for the personal learning process (Martínez-Domínguez, 2022).

If we analyse the forms of intervention found in aquatic education practice, it is possible to identify three main pedagogical positions. These positions should not be understood as rigid models, but rather as trends that reflect different ways of interpreting the relationship between care, challenge and learning. Some interventions lean towards overprotection, others towards imposing challenges, and others seek a pedagogical balance between these two extremes. Table 1 summarises these forms of intervention.

Table 1. Comparison of approaches to aquatic education.

Dimension	Overprotective intervention	Respectful and constructive intervention that supports autonomy	Intervention based on imposition
Conception of care	Care is associated with avoiding any discomfort or tension	Care involves regulating the context without replacing the experience	The importance of the proposal outweighs the pupil's needs
Relationship with the challenge	The challenge is systematically avoided or neutralised	The challenge invites action; it is adjusted, progressive and explored	The challenge is the requirement, and the pupil must comply without adjustment
Role of the adult	The adult constantly anticipates, supports and resolves	The adult observes, accompanies, regulates and waits	The adult directs, pushes, manipulates and controls the action
Student autonomy	Very limited or only in what they like and already know how to do	Progressive and situated autonomy	Apparent autonomy for survival because they are not being cared for
Responsibility for safety	The adult takes on everything and does not share it pedagogically	The adult maintains responsibility, the student explores	The adult implicitly delegates the risk, and the student must resolve it
The learner's experience	Calm, superficial, fragile learning	Confidence built through experience	Tension, fear or emotional disconnection
Dealing with mistakes	Mistakes are avoided or corrected immediately. The adult takes responsibility for what has happened	Mistakes are part of the process, acting as feedback on the action	Mistakes are punished or ignored; the learner needs to repeat the task to get it right
Relationship with the body and the environment	The body receives no real feedback from the water	The body learns to interpret resistance and the environment	The body obeys without emotional engagement
Learning rhythm	Determined by the adult	Set by the learner, within a regulated framework	Imposed, regardless of the developmental stage. Resists the guidance of the teacher
Use of	Minimal or non-	Central to learning	Considered a waste of

exploration	existent; plays within the limits where the adult feels safe		time
Competence development	Dependent on external support	Functional, transferable and autonomous	Rigid technique, poorly adaptable, conditioned by the stimulus of the model
Medium-term effects	Dependence and false security, leading to risky behaviour	Sensitive resilience and inner security. Confidence to explore, but without negating the need for constant supervision	Neglect, rigidity or rejection of the environment. May enjoy the environment, but is unaware of the real risks
Relationship with age and development	Inappropriate, infantilising	Appropriate to the developmental stage	Ignores the stage and the pupil's integrity
Ethical dimension	Overprotection that limits development	Respect for the pupil's person and process	Violation of respect and integrity

The educator as a regulator of the environment

If the aquatic environment is understood as a real learning space in which learners must observe and interpret their surroundings, explore different responses, and progressively adjust their actions, the role of the educator takes on particular importance: **to regulate the conditions under which learning takes place and to enable transfer or application to other aquatic settings**.

From this perspective, the educator does not act as a substitute for the student's actions nor as a constant controller of the aquatic experience (what they do, how they do it and when they do it). Their role is rather to design learning contexts in which pupils can interact with the aquatic environment progressively, explore different forms of adaptation and develop responses that are increasingly tailored to the demands of the environment (moving between two points by choosing motor patterns, whether they stop to rest and then continue moving, etc.).

This approach requires a pedagogical perspective that goes beyond the mere presentation or completion of tasks. The teacher observes how pupils interact with the water, identifies the difficulties that arise during their interaction with the environment, and progressively adjusts the conditions of the experience. Through simulated situations, possible scenarios, and small variations in the task, the space, the equipment or the level of assistance provided, the teacher can modify the level of challenge in the situation and foster new learning opportunities. Their aim is always to add value to the aquatic experience as facilitators of learning (Chirigliano & Fonseca-Pinto, 2025).

In this sense, aquatic instruction can be understood as a process of **pedagogical regulation of the context**, in which the educator designs situations that present understandable challenges for the learners, guides the process through instructions or questions, and allows the experience to evolve through exploration and the gradual adjustment of actions. And whilst there may also be more structured situations at times, depending on the group, context, moment or learning content. Learning does not, therefore, occur through imposition or mere exposure to the environment, but through the opportunity for the learner to interpret what is happening and reorganise their behaviour in relation to the aquatic environment through varied learning experiences, whilst always respecting their individuality.

This role of the educator is associated with higher levels of motivation, enjoyment, and persistence in children's aquatic learning (Minkels et al., 2023). From this perspective, the educator enables learners to progressively discover their own possibilities for interacting with water (Ortiz et al., 2025). Their pedagogical intervention is based on the ability to **observe, wait, and adjust** the context so that learners can become the true agents of their own learning.

Instead of intervening immediately in response to any difficulty or requiring predetermined responses, the educator regulates the conditions of the experience so that the learner has room to explore, experiment, and develop new ways of relating to the aquatic environment (for example, instead of picking a child up to bring them into the water, the educator waits for the child's body to move forward and meet their hands; or, instead of placing the child onto a mat, waits for them to climb up on their own).

In aquatic education, protection does not mean avoiding any situation involving uncertainty or difficulty. Rather, it means **creating a pedagogical context in which learners can gradually engage with the aquatic environment, with educational support and genuine opportunities to develop their autonomy** (emotional connection, verbal and non-verbal communication, presence, availability, trust, patience, creativity, etc.). In this sense, safety is not at odds with learning, but rather becomes a condition that allows challenges to arise in a comprehensible and pedagogically regulated manner.

From this perspective, an educational aquatic environment can be understood as the result of the relationship between three mutually influential elements: the characteristics of the environment in which the experience takes place, the type of challenge presented to the

pupils, and the way in which the educator pedagogically regulates the interaction between the two (Table 2).

Table 2. Characteristics of an aquatic educational environment and the educator's role.

Dimension	Characteristics of aquatic education
Design of the aquatic environment	Rich, varied and non-uniform environments that offer stimuli, opportunities and limitations for exploration.
	Distinct stations or zones focused on different skills (floating, moving through the water, submerging, balance, breathing, and varied entry and exit techniques).
	Availability of diverse materials (floating, submersible, mobile, stable, unstable, unusual) that encourage exploration in multiple ways.
	Open-ended activities that allow for different motor solutions, not just a single "correct" way.
	Consideration of the diversity of aquatic activities and of both artificial and natural environments.
Relationship with the challenge	Appropriate, progressive and explorable challenges.
	Varied use of supports and their gradual removal depending on the pupil's readiness and the challenge to be undertaken.
	Opportunity for repetition without pressure, encouraging self-regulation.
Role of the educator	An integral part of the activity, not merely a supervisor or manipulator.
	Regulates the context, allowing space for the pupil's interpretation and action.
	Observes, waits and makes context-specific pedagogical decisions.
Educational intervention	Positive, clear and age-appropriate communication.
	Use of playful storytelling based on imagination and symbolic play.
	Activities presented as invitations; the environment itself tells the "story" of the activity, encouraging participation.
	Considers evolving approaches adaptable to all groups.
Body language and emotional expression	Active, open body language, showing a willingness to participate.
	A warm, approachable presence, without being intrusive.
	A smile, eye contact, a calm tone of voice, and positioning the eyes, mouth and height at the pupil's level.
	The ability to welcome, embrace and comfort the pupil when they need it.
Emotional climate	An atmosphere of trust, curiosity and emotional security.
	Recognition of effort, not just the result.
	Acceptance of mistakes as feedback to adjust actions or decision-making.
Educational objective	Building functional and transferable aquatic skills.
	Development of appropriate autonomy, taking responsibility for safety.
	Physical, emotional and cognitive integration of the experience.

The educator's teaching approaches in the aquatic environment

The **Comprehensive Aquatic Method** (Moreno-Murcia, 2026) offers a useful framework for understanding aquatic instruction as a dynamic, non-rigid process, in which the approach is adapted according to the learner's current stage of experience. Within this approach, different **forms of pedagogical presence** can be identified; these do not constitute fixed stages or a set pathway. There are moments when **safety and emotional support** are priorities, for example, during the first contact with water, following a previous difficult experience, or when the learner needs reassurance that the adult is available. As shown in Figure 1, the intervention is not organised into successive stages, but rather as flexible pedagogical positions that can coexist within the same session and vary depending on the learner's situational context.

The phases of aquatic educational intervention should not be understood as closed stages or as a mandatory sequence. They are used here as a descriptive tool to highlight the educator's decision-making logic in real-life practice contexts. These forms of intervention are conceived as flexible pedagogical approaches that can coexist and alternate depending on the situated assessment of the learner and the context.

Understanding the educator as a regulator of the context involves recognising that their pedagogical intervention does not follow a single course of action. Throughout a water education session, the teacher may adopt different roles depending on what occurs in the interaction between the pupil, the task and the environment. These roles should not be understood as rigid phases or as a predetermined sequence of intervention, but rather as modes of pedagogical presence that the educator can adopt to support the learning process.

At times, the teacher's intervention may focus primarily on **observing** how the pupils interact with the aquatic environment. Observation allows us to understand what strategies the pupil uses to engage with the water, what difficulties arise during the experience, and what forms of adaptation begin to emerge. This approach is essential to avoid overly premature intervention that supplants the pupil's own actions before they have had the opportunity to explore their own responses.

On other occasions, the teacher may choose to **wait** before intervening. Waiting does not mean neglecting the educational process, but rather allowing pupils time to interpret the situation, adjust their body position or try out new ways of interacting with the water. This scope for exploration can help pupils discover solutions for themselves that would not have emerged had the adult intervened immediately.

At certain times, however, the teacher may consider it necessary to **intervene** to guide the experience. This intervention can take various forms: offering a prompt to help understand the task, modifying the environmental conditions, introducing a material that facilitates the action, or suggesting a variation on the activity. In these cases, the pedagogical intervention does not replace the pupil's action, but rather reorganises the context to open up new learning possibilities.

It may also be necessary to **provide support** when pupils face situations that cause some uncertainty or difficulty. Providing support does not mean completely controlling the pupil's actions, but rather offering educational guidance so that they can continue to explore without the experience becoming overwhelming. This kind of support ensures that the challenge remains within a range of difficulty that promotes learning.

Finally, the educator can **increase the challenge** when they observe that the student is beginning to cope with greater confidence in the aquatic environment. Introducing small variations to the task, adjusting the water depth, changing the direction of movement, or suggesting new combinations of movements can open new opportunities for the student to continue developing their ability to adapt to the environment.

These different pedagogical approaches reflect the fact that educational intervention in the aquatic environment does not consist of applying a fixed set of techniques, but rather of **continuously interpreting what is happening during the learning experience**. The educator adjusts their approach based on the pupils' responses, the characteristics of the environment and the type of challenge presented at any given moment.

Conclusion

Aquatic education involves guiding people through the process of gradually discovering and adapting to an environment that presents conditions different from those on land. Floating, breathing, orienting oneself or moving through the water requires a reorganisation of one's relationship with one's own body and with the environment. For this reason, educational experiences in the aquatic environment not only influence the learning of specific motor skills, but also the way in which pupils perceive, interpret and cope with situations that arise in this

environment.

Throughout this essay, it has been argued that educational intervention in aquatic settings tends to oscillate between two extremes. On the one hand, the tendency to overprotect pupils can lead to overly controlled learning environments, in which opportunities for exploration and adaptation to the environment are limited. On the other hand, indiscriminate exposure to challenges, when not pedagogically guided, can lead to experiences that hinder the development of a positive relationship with water, resulting in physical and emotional exhaustion that undermines motivation and may culminate in early or permanent withdrawal from the sport.

Overcoming this dichotomy involves understanding that aquatic learning does not occur through the systematic removal of difficulty, nor through mere exposure to the environment. Learning to interact with water requires experiences in which learners can explore, interpret what is happening and progressively adapt their responses to the demands of the environment. In this process, the role of the educator is fundamental.

From this perspective, the aquatic educator does not act solely as a transmitter of content or as a permanent guarantor of control over the situation. Their main function is to **regulate the conditions of the educational context** so that learners can interact with the aquatic environment in a progressive and meaningful way. Designing comprehensible situations, adjusting the level of challenge, observing learners' responses and supporting the process through tailored pedagogical interventions are essential elements of this educational mediation.

When aquatic instruction is guided by this approach, protection does not mean avoiding any experience of uncertainty or difficulty; rather, it means creating a context in which challenges can arise in a comprehensible and controlled manner, allowing learners to progressively develop their ability to adapt to the aquatic environment. In this sense, protection is not at odds with learning, but rather constitutes a condition that enables challenges to have educational value.

Understanding aquatic education through this balance between protection and autonomy allows the learner to be placed at the centre of the educational process. Learning ceases to depend exclusively on constant adult guidance or direct exposure to the environment, and instead emerges from the meaningful interaction between the learner, the aquatic environment and the pedagogical conditions that govern that experience.

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