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Learning to swim is like learning Swedish, not ice-skating

A nation with plentiful water sources and strong aquatic culture, swimming ability is as expected in Sweden as being able to drive in the U.S. With mandatory swim tests in schools, standardized by the Swedish Lifesaving Society (SLS), in theory, every Swede should possess this crucial skill. However, immigrants not only miss some or all swim schooling, but often have differing perspectives on aquatic safety and behavior.

SLS has therefore implemented a program, training immigrant swim teachers to increase swim ability within their communities. Following this program, a study was conducted in which nine such teachers from Middle Eastern backgrounds were interviewed across Sweden regarding their meaning of swimming ability and experiences while teaching newly immigrated families.

Analysis shows that strategies and barriers vary according to gender and age of students, depicted in *Figure 2*. Females face additional barriers, mainly regarding clothing, lacking female teachers, and gender roles stemming from their birth culture.

Swimming ability developed as a concept since immigrating, even among those who could swim prior to emigrating. The meaning shifted from a hobby or luxury – like ice-skating – to an empowering, lifesaving necessity. Learning to swim is crucial in the integration process, something the teachers communicate to newly immigrated community members. Swimming ability allows participation in Swedish social activities and nature, enables children and youth to pass gym and fit in at school, and moreover, it allows families to be safe in and around water and ice.

Programs such as SLS' are crucial for an equitable and safe society. The results of this study will aid designing and implementing similar programs in Swedish or other settings. Collaboration and willingness among swim teachers, pool management, community leaders, and migration agencies is necessary for effective implementation.