



Bine A. Dick

*University of South Florida, FL*

## Healing through literature: Cancer and your students

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Literature opens doors of discussion and allows teachers to present material that would otherwise be difficult to teach. Literature is a form of recreation, guidance, and—for the topic of this article—nurturance. That is why, when dealing with children and young adults with cancer, it is necessary to find literature that is honest as well as perceptive of their fears, frustrations, and emotional well being. According to the American Cancer Society (American Cancer Society [ACS], 1988) there are several criteria when choosing a book for the child with cancer. These include, choosing a book in which the author deals with the physical, practical, and emotional manifestations of cancer accurately. The characters should behave realistically as they relate to the individual with cancer and the story should provide honest and workable advice to the character with cancer about his or her condition and potential for the future.

The first step in the educational process is for the teacher to become familiar with the child's illness, treatment, and prognosis. It is important to remember to educate the child with cancer as well as the other children who are affected by the illness. There are many helpful organizations from which the teacher can gain information that is invaluable to the education of the child with cancer. The American Cancer Society publishes brochures that discuss the different types of cancer as well as their treatments. The National Cancer Institute offers a round-the-clock program called the

Cancer Information Service. Here callers speak with a trained information specialist who guides them through local resources, support groups, and access to the latest information on cancer. Candlelighters Foundation publishes newsletters for parents and youth as well as offering a number of free and inexpensive publications that aid in the understanding of childhood cancer. Each type of cancer as well as each individual child has a unique treatment plan. Childhood cancers include:

- leukemia: cancer of the blood;
- brain tumors;
- lymphoma: tumors that affect the lymph nodes as well as the central nervous system, reproductive organs, bones, and liver;
- neuroblastoma: tumors of the nerve tissue;
- retinoblastomas: tumors in the retina that, in approximately one-third of the cases affect both eyes;
- Wilm's tumors: tumors that develop in the kidneys;
- sarcomas: tumors that can occur throughout the body (ACS, 1981).

For the child with cancer, school is a place of normalcy. The return to the classroom needs to be a smooth transition for the child, the teacher and classmates. It also represents and demonstrates a belief in not only being medically cured, but also being equipped with an education (Deasy-Spinetta & Irwin, 1993). Public Law 94-142 protects a child's right to treatment is ineffective. Educators must be prepared when this situation arises and, once alternative education which might be necessary

in certain cases. Its provisions mandate the development of Individualized Education Plans including health-impaired students, such as anyone with cancer (ACS, 1988). At this time, parents are often involved with their child's treatment and remission rather than with their child's education. Parents often ask, "Why is school so important? My child has cancer and might die." Teachers must ensure a healthy and positive environment. One way to ensure this is to be an informed educator and an advocate for the child. This can be done through the use of children's literature.

### Suggested literature

Each child is unique; therefore, the diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis will differ as well as feelings about sharing the experience with the classmates. Literature in which children can relate to the main character is helpful in gaining an understanding of their own emotions in an open minded fashion. This openness is a step toward a prejudice-free enrollment as well as good medicine for the educator to administer (Deasy-Spinetta & Irwin, 1997).

*Understanding Cancer* (Terkel & Lupiloff-Brazz, 1993) is a helpful resource to have in the classroom simply because it is written for the comprehension of a child. It explains what is cancer, types of cancer, treatments, and (most importantly) looking toward the future. It deals with emotions, such as fear, guilt, anger, frustration, and sadness. This book is also realistic, "Not every cancer story has a happy outcome ... Someday, perhaps, we will find a cure for every cancer, or a way to prevent it altogether" (p. 48).

Another book that can be used in the classroom is *Kathy's Hats* (Krisher, 1992). It is the story of Kathy who explains, "Because of the cancer, sometimes I felt sick, sometimes I felt mad, and sometimes I felt scared that I might die" (p. 9). This is a startling realization for any child to endure. Treatments are exhausting physically and emotionally. Kathy undergoes treatment and is a survivor. Krisher, whose daughter is a cancer survivor, states, "As I watch her grow each day, I am reminded of the special courage that lives in the hearts of all young cancer patients, and I tip my hat to them" (p. 30).

Shannin Chamberlin, the author of *My*

*ABC Book Of Cancer* (Chamberlin, 1990) and cancer survivor, discusses with each letter of the alphabet what it is like to have cancer at the age of 10. "S's is for strong, I have to be strong to fight the battle" (p. 26). Another book that is similar to this is *An Alphabet about Kids with Cancer* (Berglund, 1994). "B is for body ... My body is a growing place, a place of stories, a place of dances and games, singing and laughing, feeling and thinking, a place of doing and being, walking and sleeping, healing and hurting" (p. 9).

*The Dave Dravecky Story* (Gire, 1992) tells the story of the baseball legend, Dave Dravecky. Dravecky dreams of becoming a baseball hero since childhood. When his diagnosis shows a cancerous tumor in his arm, the doctors tell him he will never pitch again. This is a story of how one man's dream does not fall short due to his disease. He continues to play ball for years until his arm has to be amputated due to the cancer and pain. It tells the story of strength, courage, and faith, "He stepped off the mound and bowed his head to thank God for the opportunities to play once again the game he loved so much" (p. 22). It is important to remember diversity in the classroom; therefore incorporating faith into the discussion is the decision of the entire class as well as the student with cancer.

*Jessi's Wish* (Martin, 1991) describes the courage of nine-year-old Danielle during her battle with cancer, "I have good news and I have bad news. The bad news is that the doctors aren't sure when I can come home ... the good news is that I am very hopeful" (p. 139). Even though Danielle is very ill, she remains hopeful and optimistic. This is an important message to relay, not only to the child with cancer, but also to classmates. It is important to remember that this disease not only effects the child with cancer, but all those that surround the child.

### Not every story has a happy outcome: Literature dealing with death

In the past 40 years the rate of deaths from childhood cancers has dropped by close to 60% and by the year 2000, one in 900 adults will be a survivor of childhood cancer (ACS, 1981). Though medical technology is daily advancing, there is always a chance that again literature is an effective form of

communication.

*The Fall of Freddie the Leaf* (Buscaglia, 1982) deals with death through the celebration of life. Freddie is a leaf that lives on a tree in a public park. He loves to watch the children play and listen to the stories of the older people. When he asks his best friend Daniel, another leaf on the tree, "What is death?" Daniel responds, "Everything dies, no matter how big or small, how weak or how strong... We experience the sun and the moon, the wind and the rain. We learn to dance and laugh. Then we die" (p. 15). When Freddie falls from the tree, he sees the tree for the first time and is proud that he had been a part of its life. In tragic times like the death of a child, it is important to remember the child's life, not only to focus on his[her] death. When Freddie falls from the tree he is dying, but he is comforted knowing that his life was full of pleasure and importance.

*A Little Bit of Rob* (Turner, 1996) tells the story of the importance of remembering. It is told through the eyes of a child whose brother has passed away. She finds his sweatshirt while the family is on their boat and she is comforted by its familiar smell. Later she spreads it across herself, her mother, and her father while they remember the life of her brother.

*I Had a Friend Named Peter* (Cohn, 1987) is an example of a book that should not be used in the classroom. After Peter dies, his friend Betsy asks questions as all children do. Her father replies to her question of "Where will Peter go?" by saying that he will be placed in a casket and buried in the ground to help the plants grow. It is important to remain compassionate and also remember that human beings do not become fertilizer after death.

### Final words

Children will ask questions about cancer when it becomes an issue in their lives, and teachers need to be prepared to offer the best answers. The American Cancer Society believes

that providing accurate information to children strengthens and supports realistic expectations, preparing them for unknown or anxious situations they may anticipate (Deasy-Spinetta & Irwin, 1993). Literature allows the child to become more comfortable in the classroom while, at the same time, it demolishes stigmas that are sometimes involved with a deadly disease. The return to school for the child with cancer is an essential and critical part of the recovery process. A successful return to school enables the child to progress in emotional, physical and mental health. Literature can benefit the child in each of these aspects.

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