

Yuan Brought Us Together: Teachers' Experiences in Working with Adolescent Cancer Survivors for Successful Middle School Reentry

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: With the advancement of medical technology and effective treatment protocols, many children diagnosed as having cancer can return to school during or after their treatment cycles. However, childhood cancer survivors face numerous physical, socioemotional, and academic challenges on returning to school. Recent studies on school reentry of childhood cancer survivors in Taiwan have mostly been conducted by nursing professionals, who have approached the children's school reentry issues from a medical perspective. Although these nursing researchers recommend multidisciplinary collaboration for serving children with cancer after they return to school, they seldom include teachers' perspectives and approaches in which they could be involved in their research. To understand children's back-to-school experiences and design a successful school reentry program for childhood cancer survivors, it is essential to explore teachers' relevant attitudes and experiences in this regard.

Methods: By focusing on childhood cancer survivors' overall well-being on return to school, this qualitative study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore three

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middle school homeroom teachers' perceptions and experiences working with students. Specifically, each of the participants reflected upon one of their students who were diagnosed as having leukemia or osteosarcoma in Grade 7, received treatment for 2 years, and officially returned to school for Grade 9. Two of these teachers also served as their students' bedside instruction teachers. The research data were collected through 1-2-hour-long semistructured in-depth interviews conducted at the time and place convenient to the participants. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were then analyzed using thematic analysis to transform teachers' concrete daily experiences to several abstract concepts informing their experiences. These concepts were represented by the themes introduced in the findings. **Results/Findings:** Thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews revealed teachers' deep sympathy for the students and their mothers, their Yuan-specific cultural beliefs concerning teacher-student relationships, and their creative and flexible ways of maintaining constant and close interactions with students and their mothers and connecting hospitalized students with their classmates. The connections among teachers, adolescent cancer survivors, their peers, their mothers, and other school personnel bridged the otherwise separate entities of school, hospital, and home. Additionally, it created a virtual learning community that offered more learning opportunities for all involved than these settings combined. Teachers reported undergoing a transformation in the process themselves as their understanding about life and death and the meaning of school attendance changed along the way. **Conclusions/Implications:** The implications of this study comprise encouraging the school teachers of students diagnosed as having cancer to serve as bedside instructors whenever possible, increasing classroom teachers' and bedside instruction teachers' knowledge on childhood cancer and the ramifications of cancer treatment, taking advantage of bedside instructor's official bridging role in ensuring home-school communication and interactions through formal and informal channels, and utilizing real-time or on-demand online instruction and communication programs for hospitalized students.

Keywords: Childhood cancer, middle school reentry, qualitative research, survivorship, teacher's perspective

Each year approximately 500 children are diagnosed with cancer in Taiwan (Childhood Cancer Foundation, 2018). Given the current advancement of medical technology, childhood cancer is no longer a terminal illness. In Taiwan, Childhood Cancer Foundation (2018) reported the overall 5-year survival rate of childhood cancer between 2005 and 2016 was 78% and it was 92% for children diagnosed between 2013 and 2017 for acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL), the most common childhood cancer. We are gladly seeing more children survive cancer and return to school during or after cancer treatment.

For children hospitalized for cancer treatment, school symbolizes a cancer-free future where they can study and play along with their peers (Chen & Chen, 2011). While children look forward to school life and regular school attendance is beneficial for childhood cancer survivors as it provides children with a sense of normalcy and self-efficacy (Askins & Moore, 2008; Tougas, Jutras, Bigras, & Tourigny, 2016), children during or after cancer treatment are faced with a host of issues that might affect their school reentry experiences.

First, when children return to school, they may lag behind academically and socially because of their long-term absence from school (Wang, 2013). A typical cycle of treatment for ALL can take up to two years (American Cancer Society, 2017), which is a long time for a child to be missing school. Second, due to the acute and late effects of cancer treatment, children surviving cancer are likely to be presented with multiple adverse complications, including physical, neurological, endocrine, cognitive, language,

visual, auditory, and motor changes (Bhojwani et al., 2014; Krull et al., 2016; Murdoch, 1999). These physical and cognitive changes can be long-term and continue to affect their learning, overall development, and quality of life in their formative and adult years (Ki Moore, Hockenberry, & Krull, 2013; Levin Newby, Brown, Pawletko, Gold, & Whitt, 2000; Moxon-Emre et al., 2014). In addition, children's hospitalization and treatment experiences can negatively impact their emotional and psychological wellbeing and education outcomes (An & Lee, 2019; Ang, Koh, Lee, & Shorey, 2018; Gurney et al., 2009; Yi, Kim, Hong, & Akter, 2016).

Another aspect of surviving cancer is how survivors perceive themselves and are perceived by others. Kim and Yi (2014) studied how public stigma people attached to Korean cancer survivors affected survivors psychologically. Cancer is also a stigma in Taiwan. It is often associated with death, reduced social circles, and long-term struggle (Tang, Mayer, Chou, & Hsiao, 2015).

However, Cheng and colleagues' qualitative study (2016) of 11 aboriginal youths found interpersonal factors strongly counteracted the negativity with which the cancer diagnosis and cancer treatment were associated. The support from family, classmates, teachers, and community not only offset the negative impact of illness but also motivated these adolescents to reflect on new and positive aspects of life after cancer, confirming the findings of Arpawong, Oland, Milam, Ruccione, and Meeske (2013) that strong connections to one's family and community provided emotional support to the survivors.