

Reading Children's Books to Awe and Inspire Nursing Students

By: Donald Kautz

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Abstract:

Reading illustrated children's books in the classroom to nursing students is 1 way to inspire students to be great nurses. After offering guidelines for the types of books to use and the courses books can be used in, the author describes the effects on student learning

Article:

Nursing instructors often complain that they do not have enough time to teach even basic content, let alone advanced concepts. Unfortunately, jamming in lots of content may leave students bored and may not inspire them or create a sense of awe about being a nurse. Most of us continue to be nurses because of the joy we experience, the pain we relieve, and the hope we inspire in our patients, their families, our peers, and ourselves. Taking 10 to 15 minutes out a 3-hour class session to read a children's book and apply it to the concepts being taught can create this sense of awe and inspire our students.

I spend 10 to 15 minutes reading and discussing the lessons of a children's book in most of my 3-hour class sessions, whether undergraduate or graduate clinical courses, pathophysiology, research, or leadership and management. While a few students complain that these books are not appropriate for college, many more tell me it is the books that help them remember the content. For example, when discussing the inflammatory response in a pathophysiology course for advanced practice, I read the *Hobyahs*, in which 5 dogs warn of an impending attack and, in the end, eat the hobyahs. I then tell the students that the 5 dogs represent the 5 classic signs of inflammation (warning of an infection) as well as the 5 types of white blood cells (consuming the invading microorganism).

I have even had students write and illustrate children's books which they read to the class as a part of their paper presentations. One student in a leadership-management course was so moved by the children's books I read in class that he wrote the book *I'm the Boss*, about his son with Down syndrome (see Figure 1). He read the book to the class, with his son, then aged 6, sitting on his lap.

While in an RN-BSN leadership and management course, John Wheeler, BSN, RN, wrote a book about his pre-school aged son, Brody, with Down syndrome. Using digital photographs of the child, John described his son as a leader. John showed how even though Brody could not talk, he had many of the characteristics of a great leader, including being the same with everyone, not caring what others think, adapting to every new challenge, sticking by his family and friends and relying on them when necessary, accepting everyone even if they look a little strange, asking for help only until he learns how to do it himself, and experiencing joy in the moment. Because of these characteristics, Brody is always the "boss", earning the respect of everyone he meets.

With the author's permission, I share this book with students every semester in the leadership and management course. I believe the book also illustrates the need for those in charge to show compassion, while expecting others to do their best and remain true to themselves.

Mr. Wheeler has given his permission for instructors to read his book in class. The book is available at <http://www.uncg.edu/nur/faculty/kautz/theboss/pdf>. Mr. Wheeler retains all rights to this book, do not duplicate or distribute the book.

Figure 1. I'm the Boss.

Children's books are interesting, they hold attention and tag memory and yet are nonthreatening because they are about someone else. Because they are only children's books, reading them bypasses the natural resistance to change; yet they occupy the mind and apply everyday life challenges to the complexity of nursing care. In children's books, as in adult books, readers can identify with the characters and vicariously experience their struggles and the choices they make.¹ Children's stories enable students to participate in an experience in small doses and become acquainted with suffering, joy, and growth that are outside their personal experience. Thus, the books offer a way for students to gain maturity in understanding human responses. The more experienced and mature the student, the more the student will be open to the universal truths and morals of stories.²

I have found several books that are ideal for nursing classes. Some of these books are described in detail in the Table 1, others are included in the box on page 224. Each has a main character who has to make a decision to act. The character may encounter resistance or conflict but, in the end, the character makes a choice and acts, just as we expect our students to do. The illustrations help to convey the caring that is crucial to nursing and give students a picture to associate with the underlying message.

Book	Storyline	Nursing Concepts Illustrated	Research Concepts Illustrated
<i>Officer Buckle and Gloria</i> (1995) by Peggi Rathmann; ISBN 0399226168	Officer Buckle teaches safety tips, but no one listens until Gloria the police dog acts out each tip.	To ensure learning, make teaching exciting and fun, with a buddy. Team work is hard work. It means sharing the credit and forgiving one another's mistakes.	A great illustration of variables. Officer Buckle and Gloria are covariables and only succeed when working together.
<i>Dancing in the Wings</i> (2000) by Debbie Allen; ISBN 0803725019	A hopeful ballet dancer learns through hard work and innovation to use her too big feet and too big legs to make her place in the world.	A disease may be a gift to help us learn who we really are. Our shortcomings may be our best assets; use them, be proud of them. Managing clinical manifestations of a disease is hard work; be innovative, stand out in the crowd.	Research and data collection, like dancing, are hard work, but persistence will be rewarded. When seeking funding and research opportunities, dream big. Researchers see their area of interest all around them.
<i>The Three Questions: Based on a Story by Leo Tolstoy</i> (2002) by John Muth; ISBN 0439199964	A boy learns the most important time is now, the most important person is the one you are with, and the most important thing to do is to care for that one.	Stress and coping—the boy's 3 friends all represent his modes of coping, and the kite is his faith. Help our patients to "be here, now." As nurses, when we focus on this moment and this person, we will find our own peace.	Each friend, and Leo, the turtle, represents a framework or theoretical approach or world view. Our research may not change the world, but it can make a difference for a few.
<i>The Whispering Cloth: A Refugee Story</i> (1999) by Pegi Deitz Shea; ISBN 0613012534	By sewing her life story in a Pa'ndau story cloth, Mai begins to heal and see a hopeful future. Although her story is painful, it is her life and not for sale.	Our patients (AIDS, heart disease, diabetes) have lives we cannot imagine. Creating art and telling one's story help healing (AIDS quilt). Nurses must listen to help patients grow. Wisdom of the elderly—"there is always more thread."	A perfect book to illustrate the power of qualitative research. Mai's story transcends culture. This book is remembered by more students than any other book. It shows the power of generations, culture, and the value of diversity.

Table 1. Four illustrated children's books to inspire students to be great nurses (and use research)

For example, to help students learn about goals for postpartum mothers, I read the children's book *Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch. I then point out that as the book illustrates, while as nurses we must write measurable goals, what we really want for new mothers is to love their children unconditionally and remind them that, when they become parents, they should love their own children unconditionally. This wonderful book tells the story of a mother who continues to love her son throughout his childhood although he frustrates her. Her persistence pays off because her son grows up to be a loving father and shows his love for his mother as she ages.

The book illustrates several key aspects of being a nurse: it is important to be persistent with our goals for our patients; the effects of our care may last a lifetime; and our patients (like the boy) are much more than their illness and frustrating behaviors. The book itself is a story of persistence—Robert Munsch originally could not find a publisher, and yet the book has become one of the best-selling children's books of all time. When I first read this book in class, several students came up to me afterward and said that it was a turning point for them in this first semester of their nursing education. A handful even told me that, until that day, they were considering dropping out. They had forgotten why they had chosen nursing because they were so focused on struggling through content about the nursing process, pharmacology, gerontology, and maternal nursing.

The characters in children's books can also be used to remind students of the need to show patients our human side while also showing students that, as instructors, we have a caring and supportive side. Students sometimes see us as unapproachable and different from them. Reading a book brings us all in touch with our human side,

as is illustrated by Miss Tizzy.

Miss Tizzy

Miss Tizzy is an eccentric elderly African-American woman with a purple hat and green high-topped tennis shoes, who is the favorite of all the children in the neighborhood. Each day of the week, they do something different; on Monday, they make cookies, on Tuesday, Miss Tizzy makes hand puppets and they put on plays, and on it goes; the children love every activity. Early in the story, it becomes obvious that Miss Tizzy spends a great deal of time and effort preparing for her activities with the children, the ritual activities mean as much to her as they do to the children, and she cares little what the neighbors think of her eccentric behavior.

When Miss Tizzy becomes gravely ill, takes off her purple hat and green tennis shoes, and goes to bed, the children know what to do. Each day, they do for Miss Tizzy what she used to do for them. The author does not say what happens in the end, but most students believe Miss Tizzy dies while listening to the children sing her favorite songs. Again, this is a wonderful metaphor of what is important for us to do as nurses.

Like Miss Tizzy, we need to be prepared to give care and not be bothered by those who do not understand why we do what we do. By knowing our patients, we can individualize our care. Just as the children do not see Miss Tizzy's hard work that is absolutely necessary for their daily activities, our preparation is often invisible to our patients but is crucial to our success. We also know that, to have a great nurse when we need one, we need to inspire children and young adults to choose nursing. We teach students by example to prepare to give care and model for students the value of not being afraid to do what is right. It is risky being different, but we cannot compromise our values.

Suggestions for Incorporating Children's Books

Here are some suggestions for incorporating children's books in your teaching.

1. Choose books that take only a few minutes to read. All of the books in the Table 1 and in the reference list can be read in 5 minutes. With longer books, students become restless, wanting to either get out of class or get back to the content they will be tested on.
2. Choose books that illustrate several points and be flexible about when and how they are used. The Snow Lion teaches that a transformational leader can take you to a place you cannot even imagine and is useful in any situation where the audience is asked to take on a new role or embrace new concepts. Miss Tizzy is one of my favorites because it can be used to illustrate leadership and research principles as well as general concepts of caring, and the main character is an older African-American woman. Love You Forever can be read in any class because the message is universal.
3. Choose some books students are familiar with and others they are likely not to have heard. It's Going to Come a Tide is about surviving a flash flood in rural Kentucky, The Goodnight Gecko tells the story of Gecko's living in a "healthy" house in Hawaii, and In the Path of the Great Bear takes place in the mountains of Canada. All provide a short escape to somewhere different, illustrate diversity, and are books that students are likely not to have read. Seek out books by regional authors in your area as well because these will bring pride to students for their own niche of the world.
4. Choose books to illustrate diversity. The main character in Miss Tizzy is an elderly African-American woman. Yoko is a Japanese preschooler who wants other children to try her mother's Sushi. Mai in the Whispering Cloth is a Hmong refugee sewing her hope in the midst of confinement and war into an embroidered story cloth. The Paper Bag Princess illustrates a young woman who initially goes on a quest to

rescue her boyfriend from a dragon but, on the way, discovers her own strengths and ability to be self-sufficient.

5. Avoid the Bearstein Bears and the Little Critters series, which are written to illustrate a point for a preschooler, like going to the doctor or dentist. I also avoid the Dr. Seuss books because they are too silly. In a leadership-management class, however, one of my students very effectively read *Green Eggs and Ham* to illustrate the importance of being persistent to bring about change!

6. Read a book right before a break or after completing a lecture or discussion of tough content. I often read *Love You Forever* after teaching acid-base balance, to reassure students that I did not go into nursing to learn arterial blood gases; I went into nursing because I care for people, despite their trying behaviors or exhausting symptoms. And just as the boy does not consciously remember his mother singing to him in *Love You Forever*, a patient with an arterial blood gas imbalance is likely not to remember the nursing care, although the effect of our care may last a lifetime.

7. Include citations (so students can go out and buy the book for their children or grandchildren) and the points you are going to make about nursing after reading the book. This legitimizes your use of class time to read the book and helps students make the connections. I often use trailing sentences on my power point slides to make the transition from a story to nursing. For example, my PowerPoint slide after reading *Miss Tizzy* is "What the children didn't see is the amount of time Miss Tizzy spent preparing for each day's activities, just as our patients..." (and then I verbally finish the sentence) "do not see that an excellent nurse has spent time preparing to administer medications or perform a treatment. Like Miss Tizzy, an excellent nurse seems to always be prepared with no effort at all." Using a trailing sentence keeps the point a surprise but lets students know that I have points about nursing to make based on the book.

8. Ensure that all the students can see the pictures in the book. One way is to make overheads of the illustrations on a copy machine; another is to scan the book into PowerPoint slides. Making one copy of the book to read aloud to students for educational purposes does not violate copyright laws. Do not, however, include the PowerPoint slides in the version of the lecture you print for handouts or post the PowerPoint slides on line in a web-assisted course. In a classroom equipped with document projectors or video cameras with television screens, there is no need to make copies.

Conclusion

As nursing instructors, we have opportunities not only to teach, mentor, and serve as role models for our students but also to inspire them and create a sense of awe at what it is like to be a nurse. Instructors frequently use patient scenarios or stories of patients we have cared for to illustrate quality care. These stories often begin with "I had a patient once..." which is very similar to the traditional beginning of stories for children, "Once upon a time..."³ Taking 10 to 15 minutes to read a children's book and apply it to lecture content may not only transform the lecture, it may teach students a lesson they will never forget.

A few students have even given me illustrated children's books at the end of the semester and insisted on reading them to me. One student who I and another instructor worked with as she struggled through a junior-level medical-surgical nursing course gave me *A Bag Full of Pups* by Dick Gackenbach, about a man who goes to town to find homes for a litter of puppies. At the end of the day, there is 1 pup left that no one has wanted, and the man says "You must be an unlucky pup." But at last, a little boy claims the last pup, "so I can play with it, and it can be my friend." The man says "That is one lucky pup."

The student inscribed the book with "Dr Kautz, this is one of my favorite books...I was sure I was the unwanted and unlucky pup...but thanks to you and Dr Kuiper, I realize this is what I want to do. Nursing

wants me and I want it." Is this not how we want all our students to feel at the end of the semester?

Years after having had my research class, students have said to me, "I don't remember what you taught me about research, but I will never forget Whispering Cloth and how important it is for me to help my patients tell their own stories for them to heal and to be able to picture a future full of hope." With that simple line, these graduates not only show their own ability to be great nurses, they also in essence tell their own story and picture their future as nurses, full of hope. As instructors, we are reminded of why we became nurses in the first place, and we are filled with hope as we light the way for those who will come after us.

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