

# *How to Behave and Why: Exploring Moral Values and Behavior in the ESOL Newcomer Classroom*

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This article presents an action research study conducted in an English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) newcomer classroom. The author engaged in meaningful teacher research to learn about the importance of exploring the topics of moral values and behavior through the lens of English learners (ELs). The reading project was carried out during seven instructional days, and participants had the opportunity to learn English while engaging in purposeful discussions that revealed their cultural similarities and differences. The findings suggest that, from the participants' point of view, moral values and behavior are topics that should be learned in the household and enforced at school. However, participants also agreed that addressing these topics in the ESOL classroom is beneficial for those classmates with discipline challenges at school. In addition, data reveal important themes to consider when teaching reading to newcomer ELs.

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*Não há ensino sem pesquisa e pesquisa sem ensino. (Português)*

*No hay enseñanza sin investigación ni investigación sin enseñanza. (Español)*

*There is no teaching without research and no research without teaching. (English)*

—Paulo Freire (1998)

In the United States, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) programs focus on facilitating English language acquisition and supporting content instruction principally through English-only teaching. The main purpose of ESOL programs is to develop proficiency in English while exposing English learners (ELs) to the culture and educational routines of U.S. schools (Pentón Herrera, 2015). In ESOL

classes, ELs are introduced to diverse and challenging information on a daily basis with the vision of creating a bridge between their cultural understandings and U.S. educational standards. Usually, ESOL programs offer a variety of levels/courses depending on the ELs' English abilities and their literacy skills in their first language (L1). In the school system where this action research took place, ELs in secondary education—high school—who arrive in the United States with little to no experience in the English language and/or have limited education in their L1 are often placed in ninth grade and newcomer ESOL classes, regardless of age. Thus, it is not uncommon in this school district to find newcomers in ninth grade whose age ranges from 14 to 21.

Newcomer ESOL classes are considered temporary instructional programs that address the specific needs of recent immigrant students with the vision of preparing them to expeditiously transition into mainstream academic courses (Salerno & Kibler, 2015). Newcomer ESOL programs offer ELs a variety of linguistic, academic, and cultural resources they can use to learn more about what is expected from them in the United States while learning English and content knowledge in other subjects. Due to the transitional nature of ESOL newcomer programs, instruction primarily focuses on language learning, and the incorporation of cultural elements are often merged at the teachers' discretion. As such, activities and readings that inform, teach, and explicitly explain acceptable behavior and views on moral values in the United States are not embedded in the curriculum and are rarely available in the assigned textbooks. Instead, readings in the assigned textbooks focus on everyday situations and interactions that superficially delve into feelings, moral values, and behavior. At the school where this study took place, most textbooks used in the newcomer program focus on word usage in everyday interaction with peers, teachers, and family members (e.g., greetings, locations, shopping). Hence, these resources do not give high school newcomer ELs the opportunity to critically and meaningfully engage in discussions about behavior, feelings, and moral values in the U.S. context.

This action research project is an effort to gain a better understanding of the personal experiences and reflections of moral and ethical education for high school ESOL newcomers. The ultimate goal of this study is not to solve a problem but to engage in meaningful teacher research to learn from and understand students' perspectives on moral and ethical education as it pertains to English language learning and overall knowledge of U.S. culture. An important goal of this project is to learn from students' feedback and experiences in order to inform instructional practices that relate to teaching moral and ethical education in the ESOL newcomer classroom using a guided reading

approach. Teacher research can be an isolating process and, because teaching is an inherently social activity (Best, Jones-Katz, Smolarek, Stolzenburg, & Williamson, 2015), as a teacher-researcher I believe that reflecting on my students' learning experiences will contribute to a better understanding of how to best introduce readings about moral and ethical education to fill an existing gap in the curriculum.

A note is warranted regarding how behavior and moral values are perceived and understood in this action research study. I do not intend to convey, in any way, that ELs' definition of moral values and behavior from their native cultures/countries are not relevant in the United States. This article acknowledges the importance of the participants' values, behavior, knowledge, and ways of being as dynamic and meaningful cultural imperatives of their community inside and outside of the United States. Furthermore, I understand that the values, behaviors, and related lifestyles of ethnic communities are what constitute their essence (Haynes Writer, 2017). The purpose of this action research is not to discredit the cultural moral values and behavior of ELs. Instead, it seeks to critically explore and meaningfully engage in discussions about behavior and moral values in the U.S. context from the adolescent participants' perspectives—a current gap in the literature.

## **RESEARCHER REFLEXIVITY AND INTENDED GOALS**

In research, ongoing critical reflexivity is a crucial aspect that allows “the researcher to unveil their biases and assumptions, negotiated unique socio-cultural and political contexts, and uncover various power dynamics within the research design” (Mao, Mian Akram, Chovanec, & Underwood, 2018, p. 1). In an effort to maintain author transparency, it is necessary to acknowledge that my personal values and experiences have shaped this research inquiry. As someone who was an adolescent immigrant EL, I can relate to my students' experiences navigating and negotiating moral values and behavior in the United States. For example, when I arrived in the United States, certain behaviors—such as hugging, kissing on the cheeks, and holding hands with friends—were deemed inappropriate inside and outside the school environment. Similarly, in my personal experience as an EL, I was corrected for displaying moral and cultural values from my native country—such as collectivism and (physical) affection—and was told that, instead, individuality and privacy/personal space were preferred in the United States. These were new concepts to me.

As an ESOL educator, I continue to witness how difficult it can be for adolescent ELs to discover what constitutes appropriate moral values and behavior in the United States. For example, in the past, mainstream

teachers have corrected student-participants for showing physical affection among themselves, which is a moral value accepted in their culture. Similarly, participants have been scolded for asking personal questions such as about the teacher's age, which is deemed inappropriate in their school in the United States but is culturally acceptable in their native countries. Thus, as an ESOL teacher and teacher-researcher, I found it necessary to allow a safe space for participants to talk about, explore, and negotiate moral values and behavior from their own perspective. As such, the purpose of this action research is to learn from and understand students' perspectives on moral and ethical education as they pertain to English language learning and overall knowledge of the U.S. culture. In addition, as an action research study, an important goal of this project is to learn from the participants' feedback and experiences in order to inform instructional practices that relate to teaching moral and ethical education in the ESOL newcomer classroom using a guided reading approach.

## **DEFINING BEHAVIOR AND MORAL VALUES**

Because this action research focuses on moral values and behavior, and due to the elusive nature of both terms in English language teaching (ELT) education (Johnston, 2003), it is necessary to define them for clarity. In the context of this study, *moral values* are defined as a set of desired principles and character traits that guide an individual to evaluate and distinguish what is good and right (socially desired) from what is bad and wrong (socially not desired) (Johnston, 2003). In addition, moral values can be understood as general codes of what constitutes good citizenship and preferred moral character for citizens (Guttek, 2004). *Behavior*, on the other hand, is defined in this study as the way in which individuals behave, act, and conduct themselves in diverse contexts. Thus, behavior is "the way an individual acts towards people, society, or objects. It can be either bad or good. It can be normal or abnormal according to society norms" (Guez & Allen, 2000, p. 9). Of specific interest in the context of ELT, understanding behavior can help in dealing with situations where ELs duplicate responses reflecting cultural value differences (Kuehn, Stanwyck, & Holland, 1990) inside and outside of school.

## **CHOOSING ACTION RESEARCH**

Action research, sometimes known as teacher research, "is an approach designed to develop and improve teaching and learning.

The essence of action research is teachers solving everyday problems in schools to improve both student learning and teacher effectiveness” (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 261). Teachers engage in action research as a means of reflecting on and gaining knowledge about their teaching practices to improve them in a way that will impact students outside of their classrooms. “Action research empowers teachers to own professional knowledge because teachers—through the process of action inquiry—conceptualize and create knowledge, interact around knowledge, transform knowledge, and apply knowledge” (Pine, 2009, p. 30). As a paradigm, action research is a conceptual, cultural, social, and philosophical framework for doing research that embraces a wide variety of research methodologies and forms of inquiry (Pine, 2009). Simply stated, action research is a flexible method that teachers can use to improve their teaching practices as a solution to common or everyday concerns (Pentón Herrera, 2018).

Today, action research is used “in many countries and in fields such as public health, sociology, psychology, and some business settings” (Check & Schutt, 2012, p. 263). Similarly, its use in education is rapidly growing in the United States and internationally because many educators and community workers find it highly compatible with the emancipatory theory and methods of Paulo Freire (1998, 2004, 2014) and John Dewey’s (1933, 1938) vision of teachers as reflective professionals who build theory from practice. Furthermore, action research is also perceived by teachers as an opportunity to reflect on their own perspective of teaching and learning while seeking self-empowerment through collaboration (Pentón Herrera, 2018).

The idea for this project emanated from my need, as a high school ESOL educator, to learn more about my students’ cultural understandings of moral values and behavior and how those understandings aligned with U.S. values. As an ESOL teacher and advocate, I feel the need to teach my students the acceptable behaviors and treasured moral values that will contribute to their successful community integration and future professional careers in the United States. Currently, the newcomer ESOL curriculum used in my school district does not explicitly address behavior and moral values and, although it does include components of U.S. culture, students are not given the opportunity to critically think about civic education from a moral and ethical standpoint. Newcomer ELs are expected to learn about and experience U.S. culture through the curriculum (Staehr Fenner, 2014). Therefore, as a teacher-researcher, I identified these two important components—behavior and moral values—as missing and sought knowledge on how to incorporate them in my classroom in a meaningful way that provided a forum for dialogue and reflection.

## BENEFITS OF USING ACTION RESEARCH IN TESOL

The benefits of teachers engaging in action research have previously been discussed from practical and theoretical viewpoints in different fields of study. In *Cityscapes: Eight Views From the Urban Classroom*, Banford (1996) explored the difficulty of having shy students in a classroom setting structured around active group learning. More specifically, Banford decided to conduct teacher research to better understand what a student, identified as Maricar, could teach him about “improving writing workshop and student learning in general” (p. 5). This yearlong study changed Banford’s views on what makes writers successful and transformed his perspective of quiet students and the fact that being quiet does not equal being disengaged. A similar practical publication addressing action research is Wien (1995). Wien explained how an early childhood teacher, named Nora, was seen as an inhibitor of play by her students and, as a result, was rejected by them. After identifying and reflecting on these events, Nora engaged in a dynamic process of change where teacher reflexivity and student-centered learning became the new frameworks for successful teaching. In both of these real-life examples, teachers were faced with instructional challenges and actively engaged in research—action research—to find viable and effective solutions.

Similar to Banford (1996) and Wien (1995), examples of action research studies that reflect its beneficial nature for teachers can be found in the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). As explained by Ellis (1998), action research can be used “as a way of improving teaching and as a way of overcoming the dysfunctions of the theory/practice discourse” found in TESOL (p. 56). Similarly, action research in TESOL can be used to give teachers a voice and to contribute to the direction in which the field is heading using their classroom perspective, reflection, and knowledge as a starting point. These previous statements are evidenced by Edwards and Burns’s (2016) study in which participants’ action research efforts directly empowered them and positively impacted their organization by providing “substantial insight into students’ opinions and noticeable improvements in scores” (pp. 738–739). Furthermore, the participants’ action research efforts contributed to the improvement of the TESOL curriculum at their institution (Edwards & Burns, 2016).

Although action research publications in the TESOL field have become more prominent and widespread in recent years (see Burns, 2009; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Pentón Herrera, 2018; Sagor, 2005), additional studies following this paradigm are needed to continue challenging the hierarchical view that researchers’ perspectives and

voices are more important than teachers' (Ellis, 1998). Timothy Stewart (2006) published an article in *TESOL Quarterly* in which he made a case for action research conducted by ESOL teachers to be valued and "advocated more forcefully" (p. 428). Stewart's statement stemmed from a standpoint that teachers conducting action research benefits not only their own practices, but the TESOL field as a whole. Centered on Ellis's (1998) view on teacher voice, inspired by Stewart's vision of action research as vital for teacher empowerment, and guided by Nunan's (1997) standards for teacher research in TESOL, this article explores moral values and ethical education in the newcomer ESOL classroom through a purposeful teacher-researcher lens. It is my intent to show that action research conducted by ESOL teachers is valuable and contributes to the advancement and understanding of the TESOL field and of ELs.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Moral Values and Behavior in Education

The term *education* is etymologically derived from the Latin word *educatio*<sup>1</sup>: the action of developing physical, intellectual, and moral faculties (Báxter Pérez, 2003; Spencer, 1885). Thus, by definition, effective education is meant to not only challenge the mind and the body, but also instill moral values that are deemed acceptable according to the ethical principles of a society. Epochal philosophers, thinkers, and educators have agreed—albeit divergently—on the importance that moral values have in the development of individuals throughout their lives. For example, Socrates believed that "the unexamined life was not worth living" (Cam, 2014, p. 1203) and that the most important of all knowledge is learning how best to live (Brickhouse & Smith, 2000). Herbert Spencer (1885), from a more rigorous perspective, believed that children who are not taught how to behave and have not been educated on moral values are "extremely dangerous members of society" (p. 175). John Dewey (1909) exhorted teachers and parents "to aim at making the methods of learning, of acquiring intellectual power, and of assimilating subject-matter, such that [children] will render behavior more enlightened, more consistent, more vigorous than it otherwise would be" (p. 3).

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the definition used in this manuscript was chosen over the definition of *to train* or *to mold*, as offered by Bass and Good (2004), because of its appropriateness to the topic addressed in this study.

The intellectualization of moral education in modern times has raised the question of “how closely to relate moral education with other intellectual studies” (Brubacher, 1969, p. 211). More specifically, arguments on whether moral values should be included in the school curriculum have been present since before the 20th century (Dewey, 1909), and they continue to be debated today. As Brubacher (1969) explains, “It is a well-known fact that to teach moral knowledge is one thing, but to ensure that that knowledge issue forth in moral conduct is quite another” (p. 213). Unlike Asian countries such as Japan, China, South Korea (Kim & Taylor, 2017), and the Philippines (Mariñas & Ditapat, 1998), the United States does not include explicit moral development and education as independent objectives in the curriculum that can be evaluated in an academic environment to determine students’ moral character, personal discipline, and values. That is to say, in the United States the curriculum does not include explicit goals of assessing K–12 students’ moral values and behavior—including, but not limited to, students’ happiness, respect, well-being, and love for humanity. In fact, in the United States “most states require only a half year of civics education” (Shapiro & Brown, 2018, p. 11), with Colorado and Idaho being the only two states that have designed detailed curricula for yearlong courses (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). Thus, U.S. students are left unguided to deal with becoming virtuous citizens amid the worrisome problems facing U.S. society today that directly affect them. Furthermore, educators have no other options but to decipher how best to navigate moral development and education, taking into consideration divisive and omnipresent topics such as politics, religion, and race while also maintaining a focus on college and career readiness skills, which constitute a primary target for many schools around the country.

Character and moral education have been gaining momentum among U.S. politicians and educators in recent years, though. Over a dozen states have mandated character education, and hundreds of schools have tried to incorporate it into their programming (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008). However, moral values and behavior are yet to be explicitly included in the high school curriculum. Instead, they are seen as elements learned in social studies courses that focus on the development of democratic values (Byrd, 2012). Nonetheless, “if we have any serious regard for what it means to be human, the teaching of content cannot be separated from the moral formation of the learners. To educate is essentially to form” (Freire, 1998, p. 39). Educating ELs to understand U.S. moral values is a way to increase their freedom, enlarge their humanity, and give them the knowledge to be socially successful in this society. When high school newcomers arrive in U.S. classrooms, the primary educational focus of schools becomes

teaching language and academic content knowledge. Hence, teaching U.S. moral values and behaviors becomes secondary or tertiary. In a world where literacy and knowledge are paramount to social equality (Freire, 1998, 2004, 2014), the absence of explicit moral education instruction places high school newcomers at a social disadvantage.

## **Moral Values and Behavior in the ESOL Field**

For ESOL classes, the topics of behavior and moral values are identified in the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA)'s resource guide, which are the standards used to guide ESOL instruction and curriculum in most U.S. classrooms (Gottlieb, Cranley, & Cammilleri, 2007). In the WIDA guide, behavior and moral values fall under the language of social studies, a class designed to teach the history of the United States to high school ELs with emerging English proficiency. However, it is important to note that the main focus of social studies is to teach vocabulary and historical facts about the United States. As such, teaching information about moral values and behavior might often be overlooked and not taken as a priority because there are few standardized resources available to teach them. In fact, there is currently scarce literature in the area of English language teaching materials development that specifically addresses how to teach moral values and behavior in the ESOL classroom (Johnston, 2003; Widodo, Perfecto, Canh, & Buripakdi, 2018).

Perspectives on the role of ESOL teachers have undergone major changes over the past 50 years in the United States. Their role has changed from a "person who delivers information and allows learners to form their own views" to transformative leaders who "deliver information but, at the same time, play a leading and guiding role in the life of learners" (Shaaban, 2005, p. 202). In other words, ESOL teachers have been empowered to be advocates who implement instructional practices that improve their students' lives and well-being inside and outside of the classroom (Staehr Fenner, 2014). As explained by Staehr Fenner (2014), including and teaching relevant topics in the ESOL classroom is of utmost importance when it comes to preparing ELs to be successful in school and beyond. Including the topics of moral values and behaviors in the ESOL classroom explicitly teaches ELs the acceptable and preferred behaviors and moral values expected of them inside and outside of the school environment, which may differ from their native culture (Staehr Fenner, 2014). From an advocacy perspective, teaching moral values and behaviors primarily serves two purposes: (1) educate ELs in values and behaviors that will contribute to their success in the United States and (2) teach ELs about the

acceptable and respectable values and behavior they should expect to receive from peers and individuals with whom they interact in the United States regardless of individualities such as race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or language learning status.

Although there are scant standardized resources and models to teach moral values and behavior to high school newcomers in the United States, Shaaban (2005) proposes a framework for incorporating moral education in ESOL classes. Of particular importance, Shaaban's framework focuses on moral education as a global topic and offers methods on how to incorporate it into the curriculum in a way that can be implemented, taught, practiced, and assessed. The incorporation and evaluation of frameworks such as the one proposed by Shaaban need to be considered to transform the current achievement and performance gap between ELs and their mainstream counterparts (Au, 2011). Also, the explicit teaching of moral education could lead to resolutions of current issues faced by ELs in schools, such as cultural incongruences and lack of opportunities to develop higher level thinking with texts (Au, 2011). Furthermore, as explained by Shafer (2018), civic and moral education can "act as counterweight to the bad values, bad ways of interacting, and anti-democratic, authoritarian practices and policies" (p. 1) that newcomer ELs experience on a daily basis.

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

On the basis that "ELT is a postmodern occupation par excellence" (Johnston, 2003, p. 15) and that the TESOL field has been influenced by postmodern ideologies in recent years (Fahim & Pishghadam, 2009), I chose postmodernism as the theoretical framework driving this action research study. Postmodernism is a difficult concept to define because of its intricate nature of denying fixed meanings (MacLure, 1995). However, in the most general sense, postmodern theory concerns itself with reality as defined and understood by individuals or social groups and rejects both the eternal truths and values and the idea that there is one method or approach to rationality (Gutek, 2004). As explained by MacLure (1995), in educational action research, a postmodern interpretation "might be interested in how the claims of action research often rest on an opposition between practice and theory, that privileges the former" (p. 111), in contrast with older educational paradigms that tend to privilege the latter. Thus, using a postmodern reading in this inquiry provides a space for deconstructing the participants' experiences, reflections, and knowledge to benefit daily practices in our learning context.

In education, postmodernism is related to leading contemporary educational and philosophical orientations—including liberation pedagogy, critical pedagogy, multiculturalism, pluralism, and constructivism—that value diversity and the participants/learners over uniformity and the researcher/teacher as an authority figure (Chisnell, 1993; Gutek, 2004). Postmodernism, as a “philosophy of practice” (Johnston, 2003, p. 13), allows researchers and educators to move away from generalities of traditional philosophical schemes and takes into consideration the agency of individuals (Johnston, 2003) as a center focus. For this reason, in a postmodern classroom and, as a consequence, in educational action research inquiries, teacher-researchers must balance their roles of facilitators, promoters of expression, interventionists, observers, interpreters, and authority figures (Chisnell, 1993). Hence, in this inquiry, participants are acknowledged as having equal influence in the design—in the form of choosing their textbook and leading the conversations—and outcome—how they chose to present their answers and share their perspectives—as the designer, or teacher-researcher in this case.

Lastly, in postmodernism, the critical analysis—or deconstruction—of language, texts, and dialogues is considered a useful tool for understanding the human social experience. “Critical analysis of language, however, is not simply clarifying language statements, but rather tracing their origin and examining how different groups, at different times, have constructed and used words as instruments of power” (Gutek, 2004, p. 316). In the context of this action research inquiry, the postmodernist philosophy is used to guide the process of deconstructing the language, texts, and meaningful dialogues used throughout the study with the vision of gaining a better understanding about the participants’ personal experiences and reflections of moral and ethical education from their individual perspectives. Furthermore, because this study focuses on the participants’ personal experiences and reflections of moral values and behavior, postmodernism provides a theoretical foundation for a more user-centered and value-based approach where user/participants’ involvement, language use, dialogues, participation, and decisions are valued above all.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Mills’s (2007) five-step action research cycle was used as guide in this action research inquiry. For Mills, action research can be divided into five main steps, briefly explained below. The methodology in this action research has been divided into four of these steps for clarity and to provide a detailed outlook of my steps during this inquiry; step five is explained in the Discussion section.

- Step 1: Select area of research—Choose an appropriate topic related to the teacher-researcher’s teaching reality and that is of particular interest to him or her.
- Step 2: Collect data—In action research, multiple sources of data are preferred, to include numerical, descriptive, narrative, and even nonwritten forms of data.
- Step 3: Organize data—Triangulation is often used in action research to increase validity and reliability of the data collected and analyzed.
- Step 4: Analyze and interpret data.
- Step 5: Take action—Take steps toward improving the topic or practice addressed.

### Step 1: Select Area of Research

This action research study explores the participants’ personal experiences and reflections of reading and learning about moral and ethical education in the ESOL classroom through guided reading. Furthermore, it analyzes the potential impact that incorporating reading materials addressing moral values and behavior have for adolescent newcomers learning English. To do so, the following questions were investigated:

- What are the participants’ personal experiences and reflections of reading and learning about moral and ethical education in the ESOL classroom?
- How is guided reading beneficial when teaching moral and ethical education in the high school ESOL newcomer classroom?

**Participants.** This study involved five Latinx adolescent newcomer ELs (two males, three females). All participants were placed in ninth grade upon their arrival to the United States, regardless of their age, because of state and county policies. All five participants were enrolled in the same newcomers ESOL class and had newcomer-level proficiency. Three participants are from Honduras, and two are from the Dominican Republic. All participants speak Spanish as their first language and are learning English as a second language. They were selected because of their shared status as students in the same class—they were the only five students registered in the ESOL newcomers’ class. All agreed to participate in the project voluntarily, and their parents/guardians gave permission for their children to be part of this

**TABLE 1**  
**Participants**

Name (pseudonyms)	Country of origin	Age	Gender
Alina	Dominican Republic	15	Female
Ricardo	Dominican Republic	16	Male
Nereida	Honduras	15	Female
Miguel	Honduras	17	Male
Carla	Honduras	18	Female

study. Appropriate authorities also granted approvals. For more information about participants, see Table 1.

**School, community, and program context.** This inquiry was conducted in a public school in the northeastern United States. Milestones High School (pseudonym) is located in an economically booming suburban area that has experienced recent developments of new homes and a newly opened mall. The school is the oldest high school in its county and currently serves over 2,100 students and employs approximately 140 teachers. Milestones High School is considered racially and culturally diverse; many students and/or their families migrated to the United States from Africa, Central America, and the Caribbean English-speaking islands.

**Materials.** This action research used the book *How to Behave and Why* by Munro Leaf (1946) as its only text. The participants chose Leaf's book prior to starting the study in response to being asked to bring different texts in English that addressed the topic of moral values and behavior. After an initial discussion involving only the participants, they chose *How to Behave and Why* because they found this textbook to be best suited to their level due to helpful drawings and small text. As the teacher-researcher following the postmodernist theoretical framework, I chose to not have any input in selecting the text, understanding that the participants' voices and perspectives have equal influence as mine.

Interestingly, although the book delves into the topics of behavior and good manners, the four values that are primarily addressed are honesty, fairness, strength of character, and wisdom. In addition, the book offers opportunities for discussion and contributes to the possibility of eliciting different reading feelings and stances from participants.

## **Step 2: Collect Data**

This action research project took place on a daily basis during the last 30 minutes of the ESOL newcomer class for a total of seven

instructional days. The project consisted of reading an average of 8 to 10 pages per session followed by a discussion about the vocabulary and meaning of the text in a Socratic-seminar style discussion. Participants were told that interrupting during the readings to ask questions or comment about the message was acceptable and encouraged. In addition, because participants were newcomer ELs who spoke Spanish as L1, and I also speak Spanish, participants were told that using Spanish in the discussions and throughout our study, as needed, was acceptable.

All participants and I sat in a circle during the readings and during the discussions, as it is often done in Socratic-seminar style activities to ensure broader student interaction and encourage participation. Guided reading was identified as the best approach to use during this study. According to Avalos, Plasencia, Chavez, and Rascón (2007), guided reading is a component of a balanced literacy program and is best used with a small group of students—four to six—with similar strengths and instructional needs. The definition offered by Avalos et al. matched perfectly with the participants' academic reality. Also, guided reading provided “students with the understanding that reading is about creating and gaining meaning from text” (Avalos et al., 2007, p. 318), which is one of the goals of this project. All participants received a copy of the textbook and were told that they could write ideas, translations, or meanings on their notebooks as they read to keep them engaged and help their memory.

At the end of the study, all students were given a worksheet with nine questions to answer about this project. Students had the option of answering the questions in English or Spanish. In addition to these nine questions, students were asked to draw a visual representation of a moral value and/or behavior they identified as highly important based on their cultural upbringing and/or the textbook. Participants were asked to explain their drawing and the reasoning behind their choice. The use of drawings and written responses as forms of data generation are commonly used in child-centered research because they emphasize the voices of participants and encourage young adults to share their experiences through age-appropriate means (Bettney, 2017). Lastly, I collected the participants' notebooks as artifacts to better understand the students' interaction with the text.

### **Step 3: Organize Data**

The data retrieved from the readings' daily discussions (audio-recorded using my cell phone, in addition to writing field notes), reflection questions, drawings, and artifacts—in the form of students' drawings and notes—were organized using a triangulated approach.

All data sources identified for each question were organized accordingly to facilitate the analysis and interpretation of data.

#### **Step 4: Analyze and Interpret Data**

Collected and organized data were analyzed to uncover the participants' personal experiences and reflections of moral and ethical education and the impact guided reading had in creating a beneficial and engaging environment to learn, dialogue, and critically think about these concepts. Because qualitative data in action research are generally analyzed using inductive coding (Burns, 2010), data were analyzed using the inductive logic to detect patterns, similarities, and regularities. As such, while using inductive analysis, data were coded without "trying to fit it into a preexisting coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). In this sense, this form of thematic analysis was data-driven. The goal for using inductive coding was to look at data from the participants' perspectives and analyze their opinions and views exactly as they were retrieved (Burns, 2010). For this, raw data were carefully scanned several times to derive emerging themes and, ultimately, report findings.

The steps used in the analysis followed Yin's (2014) construct validity approach whereby multiple sources of evidence were used, chain of evidence was established, specific key concepts about the research were defined, and operational measures that match the concepts were identified. Following this logic, multiple sources of evidence took the form of daily discussions, reflection questions, drawing elicitation, and artifacts. Chain of evidence was established and defined by connecting the findings or themes identified to valid sources of data acquired from the study. Lastly, operational measures that match the concepts were identified by citing published works with similar findings to maximize the chances of validity, measurability, and trustworthiness. In other words, as applicable, emerging findings from this study were connected to similar findings from other studies found in the literature to maximize validity, measurability, and trustworthiness.

### **FINDINGS**

The findings show that participants found this action research project interesting and relevant for their lives inside and outside of school. In answering the first research question, four themes emerged: (a) putting values into practice, (b) learning moral values and behavior at home, (c) teaching other students how to behave, and

(d) comparing and contrasting values. In addition to these four themes, I as the teacher-researcher experienced firsthand the beneficial impact this project had in strengthening interpersonal relationships among teacher and students and among the students. In answering the second research question, three themes emerged that directly speak to the impact L1 support could have for engaging ELs in meaningful and deeper discussions. In addition, specific grammatical concepts that emerged during our discussions are shared with the vision of providing insight into teachers and educators teaching reading and writing to Spanish-speaking newcomer ELs who might experience the same challenges when trying to understand ambiguous words.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this section, I answer the two research questions by directly using the data and information gathered from participants during this study and discuss the findings.

### **What Are the Participants' Personal Experiences and Reflections of Reading and Learning About Moral and Ethical Education in the ESOL Classroom?**

“Yes, I recommend this book to other newcomer students because there are many people that doesn't know those values or don't put it into practice,” shared Alina. The data, responses, and interaction during this action research study suggested that moral and ethical education are important topics for adolescent newcomer ELs. The participants' energetic interaction during our discussions and active engagement with the text reflected that this was a relevant activity for them and provided a space for sharing from their personal perspectives. Participants felt like they had the opportunity to contribute to the conversation because they had heard of, or personally knew about, the moral values and behaviors addressed in the textbook. Using students' familiarity with a topic in their L1 has been addressed in the literature as the use of background knowledge or drawing on students' multicultural perspectives (Kidwell & Pentón Herrera, 2019), which have proven effective for engaging and motivating ELs. Thus, this action research project proved to be relevant and engaged students at a personal level because it addressed a topic they knew about, were comfortable talking about, and to which they felt they could contribute valuable information from their own point of view.

In addition to this initial finding, four themes emerged that give insight into the participants' personal experiences and reflections of reading and learning about moral and ethical education: (a) putting values into practice, (b) learning moral values and behavior at home, (c) teaching other students how to behave, and (d) comparing and contrasting values. The first theme—putting values into practice—reflected the participants' understanding that behaving well and having good moral values shape your character as an individual and make you a better person. "Moral values are important for a good life in the United States and in my country," shared Nereida. "Learning about moral values is important because if you go to some place and you step on someone by mistake, you say I'm sorry," wrote Ricardo. Alina explained that "generosity is [an] important value to apply into our life. If you are generous, [that] mean[s] that you are a good person and you have a good heart, in that way people like you. It is good [to be generous and to put values into practice] because you're helping someone and that makes you amazing. If all the persons would be generous, the world would be better." Figure 1 shows Alina's reflection and visual representation of the importance of being generous and putting values into practice.

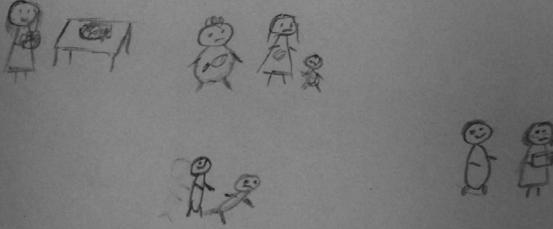
The second theme—learning moral values and behavior at home—is best illustrated by Ricardo's statement: "I learned moral values and how to behave at home. My mom, my dad, my grandmother, and my grandfather taught me [moral values]. They talked to me about how to be a good person and how to behave in front of people." Carla agreed with Ricardo, stating, "In my country we learn moral values at home. My mom taught me the importance of moral values to be a good person and a good student." Alina revealed, "My parents taught me how to behave when I was little and they continue to do it." Interestingly, all five participants agreed that moral values and good behavior were primarily their parents' or parental figures' responsibilities, not the school's. Furthermore, their responses made a connection to Pentón Herrera and Toledo-López's (2017) study, which concluded that Latinx parents who actively teach moral values and behavior to their children, and who establish a successful culture of learning at home, provide a stronger foundation for their children's academic success. Figure 2 shows Miguel's personal story as he refers to how his grandmother was an important role model during his developing years and how she taught him to be kind.

The third theme—teaching other students how to behave—arose as a conundrum related to the second theme. Participants insisted that they were successful in school because they had role models at home while growing up who taught them how to behave and have good manners. As a result, they believed that students who behaved inappropriately at school and who were disrespectful needed to be taught

### Appendix C: Drawing

**Instructions:** Draw a visual representation of a moral value and/or behavior you identify as highly important based on your cultural upbringing and/or the book. Explain this drawing in detail.

Generosity



The generosity is a important value to apply into our life. if you are generous, that's mean that you are a good person and you have a good heart, in that way the people going to like you. It is good because you're helping to someone and that makes you amazing. if all the persons would be generous, the world would be better.

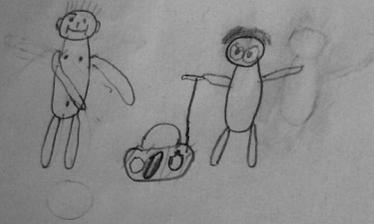
FIGURE 1. Alina's response.

moral values and how to behave at school because they were not taught at home when they were younger. Nereida expressed, "It is important that some students learn more about values and morals. There are students [who do not] have a good behavior or are bad persons. So, it is important for those students to know and learn in school about moral values to be better." Maintaining that it is primarily the

### Appendix C: Drawing

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Kind



The boy is be kind another people is good with grandma, important value to apply our life. A good heart, in that fruit, orange, banana and apple.

FIGURE 2. Miguel's response.

family's responsibility to teach children about moral values and behavior, the participants asserted that it is important for these topics to be addressed and taught in the school setting as well, because some students did not receive this type of education at home. This is further evidenced by Miguel's statement: "I know students here [at school who] need to learn this [information] in school to be good students and have good moral values."

The fourth and last theme—comparing and contrasting values—describes the participants' views on how learning about moral values and behavior in a safe space provided them with the opportunity to learn about other people's divergent perspectives on these topics. "I recommend this book to other high school ESOL newcomer student [s] because in the book are different ways to understand [who] the people really are and how they understand things different[ly]," shared Ricardo. Carla followed up stating, "Some things in the book

[have] the same meaning, but other things are different [from] what my parents taught me. This is a good activity because I see what my classmates were taught by their parents.” Although all students arrived from Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America and only two countries were represented in the study (Dominican Republic and Honduras), divergent perspectives of moral values and behaviors addressed in the reading surfaced. Thus, this project provided a platform for participants, as classmates and friends, to intentionally and meaningfully engage in dialogue to better learn about each other’s upbringings and respectfully compare their perspectives on moral values and behavior.

In addition to the four themes identified above, I witnessed many benefits that resulted from this study, including the following:

- Students became closer as classmates, as individuals learning English, and as friends.
- Teacher–student and student–student relationships were strengthened.
- Participants became more motivated and passionate about this type of reading project, where they could read books with the purpose of using that knowledge in their immediate lives.
- Students felt safe to reflect on the importance of moral values and behavior and how their divergent upbringings shaped the person they are today.
- Participants reflected on the impact moral values and appropriate behaviors have in their school and community in the United States. Thus, this project inadvertently made them realize that they are, in fact, part of U.S. society and identified as such. Feeling included might prove particularly challenging for some newcomers, but through our interactions and conversations I saw how this study helped give participants a sense of belonging.
- Participants appreciated having a safe space to reflect on their past actions, who they are presently, and the type of person they want to be when they grow up.

## **How Is Guided Reading Beneficial When Teaching Moral and Ethical Education in the High School ESOL Newcomer Classroom?**

Guided reading proved to be an excellent approach to engage participants and support them through the reading process. When asked, “What reading techniques helped you the most to understand the

reading/book<sup>2</sup>,” participants’ general consensus was that engaging in guided reading and discussing—in English and Spanish—the information as a group were the most beneficial. “For me, discuss[ing] the topic after reading and in English and Spanish really helped [me],” explained Alina. Nereida agreed: “When the teacher explain[ed] to us and we debated about [the reading] in Spanish to understand the English was good.” Carla gave more details: “When we were talking in Spanish about each topic to understand the new words in English helped me but talking in English about the moral values was very good for me too.” Ricardo shared, “When we talked about that [information] and discussed what does [the words and topics] mean helped me understand the book.” Lastly, Miguel wrote, “Reading this book [was] a little hard but discussions [were] good because my friends [classmates] talked in Spanish and I talked [too].”

In addition to participants sharing their perspective on the impact guided reading and bilingual discussions (Spanish and English) had on their reading experience, three themes emerged from this action research pertaining to reading comprehension and participation in the discussions. The first theme suggests that newcomer ELs find it easier to learn tier 2 and 3 words when connecting them to tier 1 words or when translated into their L1. For example, tier 2 words such as *glad* or *weak* were easy to explain in English by using prior vocabulary learned in English. For *glad* I made the connection with the English word *happy*, and for *weak* I made the connection explaining that it was the opposite of *strong*. However, more difficult tier 2 and 3 words such as *fair* and *wise* needed L1 translation because participants did not know any vocabulary in English that could connect to these words and it was difficult to represent them physically, unlike *glad* (with a smile) and *weak* (looking tired or hunching with a weak/tired face).

The second theme that emerged indicated how translating English words with more than one meaning in Spanish without appropriate guidance/support becomes a barrier for comprehension and participation. For example, the word *most* has two different meanings in Spanish: (1) superlative and (2) the majority or biggest number of something. Thus, I had to explain, in Spanish, in which context the author used *most* for students to choose the correct meaning. Similarly, the words *must* and *have* confused participants when used together in the sentence “they *must have* something” (Leaf, 1946, p. 11) because both words can be translated as *tener* in Spanish. To aid reading comprehension, I explained to participants that, in Spanish, the word *tener* was sometimes used to express obligation (as in the case of *must*) and sometimes used to express possession (as is often the case with the word *have*). The word *whether* was also confusing when students translated it. In Spanish, *whether* is translated into *si*, but it is used

differently than in English. In English, *whether* is used when two alternatives are given. Conversely, in Spanish *si* has the same function as *if* (conditional) and *whether* (two alternatives). For example.

- **If:** *If* I study, I will get good grades (*si* estudio obtendré buenas notas)
- **Whether:** I do not know *whether* I have the chemistry exam today or tomorrow (no sé *si* tendré el examen de química hoy o mañana)

After I explained both of these concepts in Spanish to the participants, they understood better how to use *whether* in English.

Another example was the words *lying* and *cheating*. When translated, *lying* (*mentir* in Spanish) and *cheating* (*engañar* in Spanish) did not seem different for participants. Thus, they could not understand the message of the reading that was explaining that lying and cheating are bad habits. I explained that, in Spanish and in English, cheating and lying were not interchangeable. *Mentir* (lying) is to affirm something that is not true or to withhold the truth; on the other hand, *engañar* (cheating) is a premeditated act where people seek to benefit from it. Once participants understood these concepts in Spanish, it was easy to make the connection to the words in English and understand the message from the reading.

The third theme revealed that participants did not connect with the reading when they had diverging views with the concept being explained. For example, the concept of stealing, as explained in the book, was directly connected to honesty. According to Leaf (1946), “Stealing is something honest people don’t do” (p. 23). Initially, it seemed as if participants had not understood the statement above, so I decided to ask them in Spanish. “We understand, but we just don’t agree with this,” replied Ricardo. Participants expressed that stealing had nothing to do with honesty. They provided an example of how some people in poor countries have to steal to provide for their families because the government and rich people suppress their income and freedom. Another example was our active discussion about the definition of *fairness*. According to Leaf, being fair means sharing and making others happy. The topic of being fair was particularly provoking for participants because they approached it from a different angle. Although they agreed that, to a small degree, being fair is related to sharing, they thought of being fair as giving everyone the same opportunities. In particular, the conversation focused on how they, as ELs and immigrants, were treated unfairly many times and were not afforded the same opportunities as their English-speaking counterparts inside and outside of school.

The Socratic-style dialogues after each reading session gave participants the opportunity to engage in safe, honest, and culturally enriching debates. These types of oral interactions empowered students to express their feelings and share their perspectives on moral values through their own cultural and personal lens. The examples of stealing and fairness reflected only a small glimpse into the participants' upbringing and realities before and after coming to the United States. As the teacher-researcher and facilitator of this project, I found that it was not the text that proved challenging for participants, but the point of view presented for some concepts (e.g., stealing, fairness). Students could not easily connect to the author's perspective without appropriate guidance and support because their background knowledge equipped them with a different set of lived experiences. Hence, at the newcomer level, it was found that to stimulate student-text engagement it is important to incorporate texts that not only are culturally relevant to students (Pentón Herrera & Kidwell, 2018), but also convey messages that are personally relatable to them.

### **Step 5: Take Action**

Following Mills's (2007) five-step action research cycle, after analyzing and interpreting the data I decided to take action. I found that this project proved successful and beneficial for involving students in meaningful language teaching and learning. Also, the relationship between all of us became stronger because we engaged in discussions in which we shared personal stories and reflected on how similarly or differently we were raised. In a way, I felt as if this project helped students feel safer and more included; our classroom became a living space of mutual respect and dialogue. My students and I decided to implement similar projects every quarter to discuss moral values and behavior, and we agreed that newer texts that addressed their culture were more appropriate and meaningful to them.

## **CONCLUSION**

Engaging in meaningful literacy instruction that delved into the topics of moral values and behavior in the newcomer ESOL classroom proved enlightening. Participants found both topics to be interesting as they made connections to their upbringing and cultural and personal identities. In addition, participants agreed that the inclusion of moral values and behavior in school settings could help students reflect on their personal experiences and fill the gap for those who

have never been introduced to these topics in their household. Similarly, Socratic-seminar style discussions proved effective in reaching and engaging participants in truthful and meaningful conversations about the text, in English and Spanish. Lastly, data supported previous publications that explained the importance of implementing culturally relevant texts for minority students in literacy programs (Au, 2011; Pentón Herrera & Kidwell, 2018) that directly connect and speak to their lived experiences.

As the participants' ESOL teacher and this project's teacher-researcher, I had the opportunity to gather data while interacting with my students in meaningful and, I like to think, life-changing interactions. A particular topic that I had not thought about while designing this project was the validity of current texts that portray moral values and acceptable behaviors from today's perspective. A question that continued to come up throughout this project was: "Have the definitions of moral values and behavior evolved in the United States from the time this book was written (in 1946) to today?" If so, I wonder about the impact this definition change could have to our society and to the depth of connection newer generations can achieve with older texts that may not be relevant to them presently. For example, the discussion of how fairness was addressed in the book did not seem to encapsulate today's definition of fairness, especially for 21st-century immigrant ELs in the United States. Personally, I believe that textbooks that talk about moral values and behavior from a 21st-century perspective would be better received than books from the 20th century that did not take into consideration and could not have imagined the realities ELs are exposed to today.

The ultimate goal of this study was not to solve a problem but to engage in meaningful teacher research to learn from and understand students' perspectives on moral and ethical education as it pertains to English language learning and overall knowledge of U.S. culture. This action research project proved engaging, interesting, and important for newcomer ELs arriving to the United States. In addition to giving participants a voice to express their messages and share their stories (in both English and Spanish), addressing moral values in a safe and respectful ESOL classroom motivated purposeful reflections about their lived experiences and what it means to be a better human being. This study had many limitations, including the number of participants and the participants' positive upbringing as children. In addition all participants spoke Spanish as L1, and all were honor students at school. All of these factors might have contributed to the positive direction of the findings. However, I believe that similar action research studies could be applied in other language classes (ESOL, world languages, language arts), with participants with different moral

socialization skills, and with different age groups as long as appropriate and culturally relevant texts are used.

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