

Igniting Students' Advanced Moral Development through the Theory of Moratherapy

Sabrina A. Brinson
Missouri State University
United States

Abstract

Why does jealousy rear its ugly head when someone else is in the spotlight? Why are shortcuts and cheating so tempting? Why are “isms” like ableism, classism, colorism, racism, and sexism so prevalent 24 years into the 21st Century? With so many moral lessons to learn, why aren't the Theory of Moratherapy and children's literature used more often for moral education and self-care? Demonstrated is the intersectional use of the Theory of Moratherapy and experiential learning activities with culturally sustaining cautionary tales that are reinforced with positive, affirming stories, all of which are Guiding Tools designed to ignite advanced moral development among students, and to maximize positive early childhood learning environments (Pre-K – 5th) as “Doing the Right Thing Safe Spaces.” Additionally, provided to further enhance professional development and experiential learning activities is a clearinghouse of culturally sustaining cautionary tales and positive, affirming stories.

Keywords: Advanced Moral Development, Culturally Sustaining Cautionary Tales, “Doing the Right Thing Safe Spaces,” Positive Affirming Stories, and the Theory of Moratherapy

1. Introduction

Why does jealousy rear its ugly head when someone else is in the spotlight? Why are shortcuts and cheating so tempting? Why are “isms” like ableism, classism, colorism, racism, and sexism so prevalent 24 years into the 21st Century? With so many moral lessons to learn, why aren't the Theory of Moratherapy and children's literature used more often for moral education and self-care? Demonstrated is the intersectional use of the Theory of Moratherapy and experiential learning activities with culturally sustaining cautionary tales that are reinforced with positive, affirming stories, all of which are guiding tools designed to ignite advanced moral development among students, and to maximize positive early childhood learning environments (Pre-K – 5th) as “Doing the Right Thing Safe Spaces”.

Primary Guiding Tool: The Theory of Moratherapy

The Theory of Moratherapy is a transformative vehicle designed to facilitate an individual's understanding of high moral behavior. Progress in moratherapy occurs on a continuum that ascends upward from immoral behavior (e.g., cheating) to advanced moral behavior (e.g., integrity). Moratherapy generates active participation through the double helix of institute- and individual levels: First, the institute-level requires institutions to adopt philosophies of goodwill and ethical behavior towards all individuals. Second, on the individual-level, a person has to actively engage in the related process to develop sound morals to govern individual perceptions, feelings, choices, and actions towards self and others Brinson [3]. Rationale: In reference to immoral conduct, too often apathy is a strong fertilizer of its' power and growth. Likewise, there is an overall tendency for individuals to travel on the path of least resistance. Subsequently, nonchalance and “going along to get along” are primary reasons for the prevalence of immoral practices. Spotting said challenges and related consequences can generate the concern needed for individuals to veer off the path of least resistance and proactively abolish immoral conduct.

Flagship Model - Early childhood education institutes should accept the moral responsibility required to establish moral missions like integrity, justice, reliable work ethics, perseverance, and genuine diversity, equity, and inclusion, all of which culminate into positive, anti-bias practices aka “Doing the Right Thing Safe Spaces.” Fundamentally, “Doing the Right Thing Safe Spaces” should be free of “isms” like ableism, classism, colorism, racism, sexism, and other discriminating actions, to ensure that all students are embraced. Creating a supportive and inclusive environment includes proactive efforts for all students to feel valued, respected, and included Schaffner and Bushwell [11]. Equally important, there should be on-going, theme-based, student-led experiential learning activities to ignite students' advanced moral development (e.g., amiable

conflict resolution, integrity, moral fortitude, positive problem-solving, and a strong moral compass).

2. Literature Review

Moral Development - Children need to know that life is full of choices and such choices come with rewards or consequences. They really need to know that they are accountable for the good, bad, or apathetic choices they make and interactions they have with others Brinson [3]. Children must be adept at civil behavior that includes manners, respect, and competencies to get along with people from diverse populations of race, culture, and socioeconomic backgrounds Morrison [9]. The preschool period is of critical importance in reference to moral development in the lives of children. Values are ethical principles that contain good and desirable traits, motivate and influence human behavior, affect decision-making processes, and give us an idea about what we should be like and how we should act Cooper [4]; Sagiv, [10]; Shaefer [12].

Children's Literature – The Children's literature proffers a bounty of benefits as morally responsive education designed to facilitate moral development. Children who are naughty by nature of temperament or by choice can benefit from cautionary tales that teach life lessons about responsibility, morality, self-sufficiency, and good will toward others Brinson [3]. Culturally sustaining children's books reflect awareness, knowledge and appreciation of different cultural groups; and authentic details that help define said culture(s) are included. It is also important to actively seek sound representation of culturally sustaining books by writers and illustrators with authentic experiences (e.g., membership in said cultural group). Culturally authentic books written and depicted by authors and illustrators who are members of the cultures they are portraying are valuable inclusions because of the authentic, culturally conscious ideology provided Lohfink [7]. Culturally sustaining children's books are used as curricula to embrace, validate, support, and advance the upward mobility of students in all communities Brinson [2]. Stories that reflect real life events can engage children in critical thinking, increase their problem-solving skills, and heighten their awareness of difficult life issues. Encourage discussions about the stories, and observe their responses, Lilly and Green [6]. Retelling stories to talk about problem situations, characters, their motivation, decisions, and behaviors can aid students in determining cause and effect relationships. They can compare plots, characters, and messages in different stories. Children's literature can also improve students' listening skills and help shape their feelings, thoughts,

and conduct, all of which helps students get to know themselves better Isitan and Gonen [5].

Summary - Moral development is an integral part of students' holistic, healthy development. As early as possible concentrated efforts should be made to facilitate, nurture, and advance moral development (e.g., high moral consciousness). Teaching young children to distinguish from right and wrong is just as essential as teaching them the alphabet, because the ability to make good moral choices are the signature ABC's of life. High quality, developmentally appropriate children's literature such as culturally sustaining cautionary tales can be instrumental in spotlighting immoral practices, consequences, and negative impacts to avoid. Likewise, high quality, developmentally appropriate children's literature such as positive, affirming stories can be equally instrumental in highlighting moral practices, rewards, and positive impacts to facilitate.

3. The Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework sparks a paradigm shift to a re-imagined curricula that is generated by the transformative use of the Theory of Moratherapy to foster advanced moral development. Overall, the institute- and individual levels should be embraced to personify the Theory of Moratherapy as a guiding tool of agency, education, and self-care for on-going, equitable, morally responsive learning experiences with students in a variety of meaningful spaces. To illustrate, interactive readings with culturally sustaining cautionary tales provide students with insight into immoral practices to avoid, along with additional opportunities for students to gain insight into moral practices to embrace through interactive readings with positive, affirming stories:

Primary Objective 1

Immerse students in morally responsive activities that provide experiences in the learning process for them to become autonomous as their best authentic selves (e.g., self-love, self-worth, and self-confidence) through requisite competencies (e.g., assessments, reflections, and deep introspections). The ultimate goal of developing autonomy in children is for them to govern their behavior, make decisions about good and bad, right and wrong, and the way they will behave in relation to themselves and others Morrison [9].

Primary Objective 2

Prevent/Eradicate the "isms" like ableism, classism, colorism, racism, and sexism, along with other negative

actions like jealousy, greed, and in-person/cyber bullying through morally responsive activities that provide students with deep insight into the detrimental impact of negative practices. Equally important, facilitate/reinforce desirable actions like selflessness, generosity, and empathy through morally responsive activities that provide students with deep insight into the advantageous impact of positive practices:

- The Flagship Model: Exercising the Theory of Moratherapy via experiential learning activities during interactive readings of culturally sustaining cautionary tales that are reinforced with interactive readings of positive affirming stories.
- The Overarching Goal: Unify the two levels of moratherapy (institute and individual) to generate positive, proactive learning climates that allow all students to grow, flourish, self-assess, and adapt accordingly in a beneficial manner.
- The Comprehensive Benefits: Students have ongoing opportunities to actively engage in the learning process through multiple modes of thinking (e.g., critical, creative, divergent, reflective, and forward thinking), predictions, reflections, inquiries, and discoveries that ignite further engagement via student-led, book-extended activities.

3.1. Guiding Tool: Culturally Sustaining Cautionary Tales

Culturally sustaining cautionary tales like the examples below can actively engage students in recognizing and challenging unfair conduct. Book-extended activities provide additional opportunities for students to be further engaged in the learning process designed to nurture advanced moral development. For example, post-reading/re-reads provide students opportunities to define and discuss inappropriate actions, as well as the resulting consequences and overall negative impact. Moreover, students will have opportunities to think, exchange ideas, and collaborate to rewrite the tales with appropriate actions that yield rewards and an overall positive impact. As a result, students benefit from understanding inappropriate practices and resulting consequences. Equally important, students also benefit from self-identifying appropriate practices and the resulting rewards.

3.1.1. Naughty by Nature? What happens when you get something before you are ready for it? *Baby Rattlesnake* by Te Ata and Lynn Moroney [15] is a delightful Native American tale that teaches children about patience and

responsible actions. Baby Rattlesnake just could not wait to get his rattle like his big brother and sister have, but his parents tell him he's too young. So he cries and cries until his wish was granted, and my my does he use it, or rather mischievously misuse it, to "shake, rattle, and roll" all over others. Baby Rattlesnake learned to play tricks with his rattle, like hiding in rocks when small animals came by and darting out rattling, "S-S-S-S-S!" He made Jack Rabbit jump; he made Old Man Turtle jump; and he made Prairie Dog jump. Baby Rattlesnake had big fun laughing and laughing. He took great delight in scaring the animal people until that fateful day when he scared the wrong person. "WAAAAH!" Uh oh! His rattle was crushed, literally, due to his own antics. Alas, Baby Rattlesnake ended up wishing he had exercised the patience to wait until the right time to get his rattle; and he really wished he had utilized self-control and said no-no to his naughty behavior "S-S-S-S-S!". Moral Benefits: Students Learn That the Art of Patience and Self-control Pay Off.

3.1.2. Do the Right Thing! Why must one find out the hard way that there are big consequences for cheating and shortcuts? *Carlos and the Cornfield/Carlos y la Milpa de Maíz* by Jan Romeros Stevens [21] is a thought-provoking story with English and Spanish text that shows children the punitive results when shortcuts are taken. It was Carlos' job to plant the seeds for the corn. His father showed him how to do it properly by noting that three seeds only had to be dropped in each hole in all the rows, with a reminder that otherwise the corn will not grow right. Carlos started planting seeds the right way but when he realized how much time and hard work was involved he quickly took a shortcut by doubling up on the number of seeds he planted. True, he was done in record time, but oh no! When it was time for the corn to sprout, it didn't. Carlos tried to fix it, only to find it was hopeless. So, he had to suffer the repercussions of his shortcuts, which meant doing double the work because he had to buy more seeds and start all over again. But this time Carlos did not cheat the process. Instead, he only dropped three seeds in each hole, in each row, until the entire field had been planted properly. Morally, Carlos learned how important it was to do the right thing by taking the time to complete his job the right way. Moral Benefits: Students Learn That There are No Profits Through Cheating and Shortcuts, but There are Plenty of Consequences.

3.1.3. Different Does Not Mean Deficient. Classism: How long will society dictate the faux class system that rules humanity? *The Dirt Girl* by Jodi Dee [17] is an intriguing tale that is instrumental in eradicating classism and other negative acts (e.g., marginalizing others not

deemed to be up to your standards). When Zafera goes to school for the first time, all the children laugh and tease. Zafera is a beautiful little girl, yet she often has dirt on her hands and twigs in her hair. When she invites her school peers to her birthday party, they attend out of curiosity to see how this “weird” girl lives. Much to their surprise, they are delighted to discover the beauty of the world-class life that Zafera lives in harmony with nature. Moral Benefits: Students Learn That Real Class is Earned from R-E-S-P-E-C-T for Everyone Else and Yourself.

3.1.4. Eyes Wide Shut. When will “isms” like colorism cease to divide and conquer the heart and soul of humanity? *Sulwe* by Lupita Nyong’o [20] addresses the very real and very ugly issue of colorism that is still pressing in today’s society. Sulwe has beautiful skin the color of midnight. She is darker than everyone in her family and she is darker than everyone in her school, which she sees as a problem. Sulwe just wants to be beautiful, and she thinks that means that she should have a light complexion like her mother and sister-Why does Sulwe think that? Messages spilling out of every aspect of society equates light with goodness and dark with evilness. Fortunately, a magical journey in the night sky opens her eyes and changes everything, especially Sulwe’s self-love, self-worth, and self-confidence.

Moral Benefits: Students Learn That Innate Beauty Radiates Through the WHOLE Spectrum of Our Skin Colors.

3.2. Guiding Tool: Positive Affirming Stories

Positive, affirming stories like the examples below can actively engage students in recognizing and obtaining moral aspects of development. Students can have vicarious experiences through children’s literature that help them learn about important values and desirable traits Bayraktar [1]. Literary works can also help students learn about abstract concepts like kindness, love, and being helpful, all of which contributes to the development of their personas Uzuner [13].

3.2.1. Positive Self-affirmations Galore! *I Am Every Good Thing* by Derrick Barnes [16] celebrates a cornucopia of moral benefits personified by the high-spirited young man profiled. Come along on the road to discovery of his personal identity (e.g., truth, determination, and loyalty to friends). Even when he stumbles down into a valley, he has the resolve to shake it off and step back up until he reaches the pinnacle of his targeted goals through the power of his own self-

worth.

Moral Benefits: Students Learn That It is Okay to Make Mistakes. Students Also Learn About the Positive Reinforcements and Multidimensional Discoveries of Self-assessments Required to Operationalize Their Own Personal Identities.

3.2.2. Harvesting Priceless Rewards of Positive Change. *Change Sings: A Children’s Anthem* by Amanda Gorman [18] trumpets a call to action, and children gain a great deal of satisfaction when they discover that they have the power to make a positive difference in their own communities; and they are buoyed up further when they realize the magnitude of their superpower to change the world, starting with their desire to change themselves.

Moral Benefits: Students Learn about the Selflessness and the Gratification Gained Through the Transformative Social Justice That They Can Generate Through Their Own Self-determination.

3.2.3. My Word is My Bond. *I Promise* by LeBron James [19] demonstrates the multifaceted benefits of the actual *I Promise School*, aka a flagship model of a “Doing the Right Thing Safe Space” that maximizes a positive early childhood learning environment. The synergy is palpable of the honor, commitments, and ownership of opportunities to excel that are personified by the young students in the school’s attendance who learn while leading.

Moral Benefits: Students Learn that Moral Missions of Ethical Leadership, Conscientiousness, and Reliable Work Ethics are Big Payoffs in Accomplishing Goals.

3.2.4. Lifting Others as I Climb. *What is Your Super Power? Empathy* by Lillian Arbogast [14] provides readers with positive options and interventions to utilize when a child with different experiences are unfairly judged and negatively treated, because they witness her peers do something positive about it.

Moral Benefits: Students Learn About the Importance of Good Citizenship like Stepping in with Kindness, Empathy, and Support When They Encounter a Peer in Despair and/or Experiencing Unkind Treatment. Bonus Benefits: Students Experience Priceless Intrinsic Comfort for “Doing the Right Thing.”

3.3. Guiding Tool: Experiential Learning Activities

Meaningful, theme-based, interactive readings are productive experiential learning activities to advance moral development. For example, to engage young

students in all stages of the reading process with culturally sustaining, cautionary tales during the introduction pose questions about book topics; take time to explain the undesirable conduct, and outline themes, words, and actions to watch out for as the plot unfolds. While reading the tales pose more questions and ask students to make predictions and share their reflections. To heighten comprehension about immoral practices, at the end of the tales ask students how they feel about the outcomes, discuss negative choices, undesirable conduct, and the consequences. Afterwards, facilitate student-led follow up activities to further learning experiences.

To illustrate, as part of the on-going learning process, task students with re-writing tales with positive themes, choices, desirable conduct, and rewards. Equally important, engage young students in all stages of the reading process with positive, affirming stories. To heighten comprehension, at the end of the stories take time to engage students in discussions about the benefits of the moral practices, positive choices, and the rewards. For instance, follow up with student-led activities like tasking students with re-reads of stories to identify examples of desirable conduct (e.g., ask students how they feel about their noted choices). Moreover, for deep dive definitions of advanced moral development, generate word walls because displaying, defining, and discussing benefits of profiled words over time further enhances on-going opportunities for students to appreciate, internalize, and demonstrate examples of advanced moral development. The learning outcomes include the following:

- Demonstrate a sound understanding of the effectiveness of the primary Guiding Tool, the Theory of Moratherapy, along with the other Guiding Tools that include culturally sustaining cautionary tales, positive affirming stories, and experiential learning activities to advance the moral development and self-care of young students (e.g., developing a strong moral compass; supporting the achievements of others; and experiencing emotional gratification for smart choices).
- Utilize the Guiding Tools to build anti-bias, developmentally appropriate libraries with a wealth of theme-based, culturally sustaining cautionary tales and positive, affirming stories that are designed to personify all-inclusive, nurturing moral systems of education and self-care to maximize positive, proactive learning environments (e.g., home-, school-, class-, and community).
- Facilitate the on-going use of the Guiding Tools to Generate meaningful, student-oriented / student led

experiences that crystalize and strongly reinforce moral development (e.g., moral character, generosity, forgiveness, and cordial interactions with others).

- Employ train-the-trainer accountability action steps with others, to increase the use of the Guiding Tools for more meaningful learning applications with more students to provide them with opportunities to personify advanced moral development, across more home-, school-, class, and community venues.

4. Discussion

Demonstrated was the use of culturally sustaining cautionary tales and positive, affirming stories to employ the Theory of Moratherapy via experiential learning activities to advance students' moral development. Why is it so pressing to utilize the Theory of Moratherapy and the other Guiding Tools in early childhood education arenas that are transformed into "Doing the Right Thing Safe Spaces?"

Fast Forward via Critical thinking: Tragically, far too many students suffer physically, socially, and emotionally in silence throughout their whole school experience. For example, feeling invisible, being ridiculed for differences that make us unique, and being targets of bullying:

Research shows that 1 out of every 5 students report being bullied = 20%. Far too much have been said suffering transforms to out of control rage and violent acts like school shootings.

Tragically, by March of 2024, in the United States there had already been 35 school shootings-9 on college campuses and 26 on K-12th schools. The shootings left 17 individuals dead and 39 injured Matthews [8]. As a result, it is crucial to disrupt the tragedy pattern: As an integral part of healthy, holistic development (e.g., cognitive, social, emotional, and moral) morally responsive education should be facilitated as early as possible. For example, young students should be actively engaged in the related learning process via experiential learning activities that afford them opportunities to gain proactive skills like a strong moral compass that can be exercised for emotional well-being to do the right thing (especially in the midst of troubled times), instead of tragic attacks of retaliation for feeling wronged, be it real or perceived. Furthermore, in light of the other recent tragedy on July 13, 2024, that left one person dead, and two others injured during an assassination attempt on a United States president, imperative are optimal opportunities for young students to develop strong moral characters that are navigated by strong moral compasses.

5. Conclusion

The Theory of Moratherapy is a transformative flagship model designed to facilitate high moral comportment on institute- and individual levels. Highlighted was the intersectional use of the Theory of Moratherapy and experiential learning activities with culturally sustaining cautionary tales that are reinforced with positively affirming stories. All of the aforementioned Guiding Tools were designed for the following:

To establish “Doing the Right Thing Safe Spaces” like early childhood education venues that exemplify compassionate humanity; to proffer a diagnosis of the challenges of immoral conduct (e.g., lack of concern and paths of least resistance); to prevent/abolish immoral conduct (e.g., cheating, chronic bullying, and school assaults); and to ignite/reinforce a cache of desirable conduct (e.g., social responsibility, accountability, and a strong moral compass) that is reflective of advanced moral development. Moreover, to augment professional development and students’ experiential learning activities, provided is a clearinghouse of culturally sustaining cautionary tales and positive, affirming stories. Overall, the ultimate milestone is healthy, autonomous students who can govern their own lives through morally principled avenues.

6. Recommended Resources

Culturally Sustaining Cautionary Tales
Aardema, V. (1975). <i>Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People’s Ears-A West African Tale</i> (L. Dillon and D. Dillon, Illus.). Dial.
Climo, S. (1996). <i>The Korean Cinderella</i> (R. Heller, Illus.). HarperCollins.
dePaola, T. (2004). <i>Adelita-A Mexican Cinderella</i> (T. dePaola, Illus.). Puffin.
Gersen, M. (1995). <i>Why the Sky is So Far Away</i> (C. Golembe, Illus.). Little, Brown Book.
Hayes, J. (1996). <i>A Spoon for Every Bite</i> (R. Leer, Illus.). Orchard.
Martin, R. (1998). <i>The Rough-face Girl</i> (D. Shannon, Illus.). Puffin.
Pollaco, P. (1995). <i>Babushka’s Doll</i> (P. Pollaco, Illus.). Simon and Schuster.
Rohmer, H., and Gomez, C. (1989). <i>Mr. Sugar Came to Town/La visita del Sr. Azucar.</i> (E. Chagoya, Illus.). Children’s Book Press.
Snyder, D. (1998). <i>The Boy of the Three-year Nap</i> (A. Say, Illus.). Houghton Mifflin.
Soto, G. (2000). <i>Too Many Tamales</i> (E. Martinez, Illus.). G. P. Putnam.
Souci, R. D. (1989). <i>The Talking Eggs</i> (B. Pinkney, Illus.). Dial.

Step toe, J. (1987). <i>Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters-An African Tale</i> (J. Step toe, Illus.). Lothrop, Lee, and Shepard.
Stevens, R. J. (1995). <i>Carlos and the Squash Plant/Carlos y la planta de calabaza</i> (J. Arnold, Illus.). Rising Moon.
Thomas, J. C. (2004). <i>The Gospel Cinderella</i> (D. Diaz, Illus.). Amistad.
Yep, L. (1996). <i>Tiger Woman</i> (R. Roth, Illus.). Bridgewater Books.
Positive Affirming Stories
Abrams, S. (2022). <i>Stacy’s Remarkable Books</i> (K. Thomas, Illus.). Balzer + Bray.
Collier, T. (2023). <i>Broken Crayons Still Color</i> (N. Vasilica, Illus.). Tommy Nelson.
Davis, L. and Tyler, M. (2024). <i>Girls of the World-Doing More Than Ever Before</i> (L. Fleming, Illus.). Zonderkidz.
Deedy, C. A. (2016). <i>14 Cows for America</i> (T. Gonzalez, Illus.). Peachtree.
Dias, M. (2018). <i>Marley Dias Gets It Done and So Can You</i> . Scholastic Press.
Goodluck, L. (2023). <i>Rock Your Mocs</i> (M. Goodnight, Illus.). Heartdrum.
Green, B. (2021). <i>Golden Like Me</i> (DG, Illus.). Brandi Green.
Harrison, V. (2023). <i>Big</i> (V. Harrison, Illus.). Little, Brown Books.
James, L. (2024). <i>I Am More Than</i> (N. Mata, Illus.). HarperCollins.
Linstrom, C. (2023). <i>My Powerful Hair</i> (S. Littlebird, Illus.). Harry N. Abrams.
Long, M. (2021). <i>Kids on the March: 15 Stories of Speaking Out, Protesting, and Fighting for Justice</i> . Algonquin for Young Readers.
Madrigal, A. H. (2001). <i>Erandi’s Braids</i> (T. dePaola, Illus.). Puffin.
Ortega, A. (2021). <i>Gratitude is My Superpower</i> (A. Ortega, Illus.). Independently Published.
Spillet, T. (2021). <i>I Sang You Down from the Stars</i> (M. Goade, Illus.). Little, Brown Books.
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