Adolescents who live in urban settings regularly encounter a complex array of people and circumstances that require sophisticated decision-making skills. Using their personal standards, adolescents coordinate moral thoughts and emotions when deciding how to act. After defining what the author refers to as moral engagement, several empirical examples are introduced to illustrate how parents and teachers might incorporate conversations into family and classroom routines that enhance moral engagement. These findings support several conclusions about the mental health benefits of teaching adolescents to appraise situations using moral standards.

Adolescents receive a barrage of messages representing the world as full of pitfalls and problems. Television talk shows and situation comedies often start with unusual social problems that individuals “cope” with; commercials frequently describe physical and social ailments, suggesting that drug companies can provide solutions; and many schools offer prevention programs predicated on the assumption that depression, early parenthood, delinquency, and substance abuse are likely features of adolescent development. Discussions of coping and resilience convey the impression that the world is a place to be endured rather than enjoyed, and unfortunately, such pathology-focused talk is especially common in urban settings. My work questions the inclination to define mental health as a matter of overcoming pathologies.

Most of my studies emphasize positive features of academic life and focus on adolescents’ appraisal of the academic setting. I examine how adolescents might actively sustain a strong commitment to learning by encouraging them to imagine a fair school, define meaningful knowledge, draw connections between academic and personal knowledge, and become aware of which organizational strategies facilitate academic success. This work does not belittle or ignore the very real mental health problems faced by some adolescents but recognizes that increasing levels
of delinquency, depression, and distress may reflect a societal conditioning process that represents life as harsh and painful.

To understand negative societal trends and how the resulting feedback affects adolescents’ mental health, I consistently remind myself of findings from an important but often forgotten paper by Miller, Brickman, and Bolen (1975). In a series of three studies, the first involving littering and the latter two involving mathematics, these researchers manipulated the type of feedback students were given to determine if the nature of teachers’ feedback positively influenced behavior. In one condition, students were told that they are doing what was expected of them; some were told they are ecology-minded in keeping their classroom tidy and others were told they have strong math skills or work hard on their mathematics. In a second condition, students were told what they should and should not be doing; some were told they should not litter and should be tidier, others were told that they should try to be good at mathematics or should work harder on their math assignments. Students in a third, control condition received no feedback. In all three studies, participants who were told that they met expectations, regardless of whether they actually did so, showed both short-term and long-term improvements in their behavior. Participants who were told what they should and should not do, like those who received no feedback, showed no behavioral changes.

When future educators learn about these findings, many often see such positive feedback as a deceptive trick and worry about the ethics of telling students that they are more accomplished than seems to be the case. Thinking this way, the feedback given to adolescents reveals a dangerous irony. The same educators who hesitate to offer exaggerated positive feedback rarely worry about offering exaggerated negative feedback when introducing self-help interventions that essentially tell students that they are engaged in delinquent activities (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999). Pathology-focused messages about adolescence seem to be more easily accepted even though the same psychological mechanisms that foster prosocial behavior could probably induce delinquent behavior if messages were consistently negative; telling adolescents that many or most in a group are engaged in delinquent activities or otherwise inappropriate and antisocial behavior, as occurs in a wide range of high schools, could well increase the prevalence of such behavior or alternatively heighten feelings of marginalization or anomie.

Conditioning effects like these are often unconscious and subtle, but young people are quite capable of controlling their vulnerability to such effects with a little reflection. A great deal of common sense was apparent, for example, when students from urban Milwaukee described ways that teachers might help everyone sustain high levels of motivation (Thorkildsen, Nolen, & Fournier, 1994). In this study, participants rated the fairness and effectiveness of teachers’ motivational strategies that emphasize what students are doing as well as strategies emphasizing what students should do. Virtually all of those students (98%) said that teachers do best in supporting students’ motivation for and satisfaction with learning by offering positive comments about something they did well along with a suggestion for improving their performance. Only 50% of these participants said that emphasizing what students should do was an effective strategy, and only a minority (30%) said it was a fair strategy. These students recognized the value of offering positive feedback to each learner but also understood that a communication about general outcomes may not be sufficient. Rather, they extended the logic of Miller, Brickman, and Bolen (1975) by endorsing positive feedback combined with task-relevant learning strategies. When adolescents activate fairness values like these, they can mute negative, unconscious conditioning effects by using their own personal standards to evaluate what is right and what is fair.

To understand the nature of students’ personal standards, I have explored conceptions of fairness, epistemology, and motivation, discovering age-related patterns in how youth and adolescents understand education. Like most researchers, I initially began my investigations as three independent topics, but the participants’ views showed a convergence I had not
anticipated. Eleven published studies exploring students’ fairness reasoning suggest that they define fairness differently depending on the definition of particular situations. Nine studies of students’ knowledge and motivation show that most students endeavor to meet their own needs, but are more comfortable in classes that are fair to all types of learners. Four additional studies reveal students’ beliefs about what types of knowledge are valuable. I am currently working with seven additional data sets that explore these patterns in different contexts. Nevertheless, when talking about fairness, children and adolescents typically introduced motivational or epistemological concerns. They also introduced fairness or epistemological concerns when asked to think about motivation. Together, these studies suggest that students coordinate these multiple forms of social knowledge in a force—which I refer to as moral engagement—that drives their social participation (Thorkildsen, 2004).

**What Is Moral Engagement?**

To understand the concept of moral engagement, it is helpful to know that motivation involves adolescents’ mental representations of experiences they observe, comparisons of their observations with their own internal norms, and mechanisms of decision making that dictate their actions. Those of us who study the intrapersonal complexity of motivation distinguish the subtle steps of appraising a situation from more obvious behavioral actions and reactions to situational feedback. We do so in order to account for the human ability to reflect on possibilities in ways that are not always apparent in behavior. Appraisal, in my work, is comprised of two dimensions. I define engagement as someone’s active feelings and thoughts about how the world does and ought to function, and agency represents the formation of specific intentions that guide subsequent action. Appraisal is the combination of engagement and agency that explains how individuals decide what to do as they coordinate their perceptions of an immediate situation with their stored knowledge and personal standards. As well, appraisal may be the feature of the motivational system that is most strongly influenced by caregivers and educators. By exposing children and adolescents to information about personal and ethical standards, adults can encourage the development of high quality beliefs in adolescents that will guide appraisals.

In examining the process of appraisal, two types of engagement emerge. Moral engagement concerns questions of justice, ethical conduct, and reactions to interpersonal circumstances. This form of engagement controls the regulation of humane behavior and the inhibition of inhumane behavior because it represents a vision of how the world ought to function. Adolescents who show high levels of moral engagement value the goal of becoming productive citizens in a fair society, formulate and critique a vision of how the world functions, and use that vision to regulate their behavior. Moral engagement in adolescents reflects an interpersonal approach to education in which learners accept responsibility for promoting the welfare of themselves, others, and societal institutions.

In contrast, academic engagement concerns a quest for correctness in intellectual thought that values the regulation of extrapersonal knowledge without concern for the ethical problem of deciding what knowledge is of value. When adolescents work hard solely to attain high test scores, they become preoccupied with discerning what material is likely to be on the test and may show little or no regard for the effect of their behaviors on others. In its extreme form, this type of academic engagement reflects an individualistic approach to education that focuses primarily on performance agendas and the need to demonstrate competence. A learner’s mental health can be threatened when these performance goals are unachievable, and most adolescents who experience chronic school failure become disengaged from academic activities in order to protect some sense of competence.

Like most people, adolescents prefer to see themselves as valuable members of society. Adolescence is a critical period in which individuals improve their coordination of extrapersonal (e.g., school learning), interpersonal (e.g., relationships...
Adolescent Mental Health

with teachers), and intrapersonal (e.g., personal standards of behavior) information, and this coordination is central to moral engagement. Thus, fostering both moral and academic engagement in education is important for promoting mental health, school achievement, and adjustment. Adolescents can be committed to education when opportunities are perceived to be fair and consistent with their lives and goals but most often are alienated when schooling is structurally unfair or apparently irrelevant to their lives.

The Structure of Moral Engagement in School

Moral engagement involves the coordination of standards for fairness, epistemology, motivational needs, and organizational strategies, a structure that has been demonstrated by two studies on how best to organize science classes (Thorkildsen, Sodonis, & Weaver, 2005; Thorkildsen, Sodonis, & White-McNulty, 2004). In one structured interview study, we asked adolescents (ages 14–19, \( n = 128 \)) to evaluate the fairness and effectiveness of 6 instructional practices, 3 for use with a noncontroversial science topic and 3 for use with a controversial science topic that differed in how much control students were given over their learning. In a similar design, adolescents (ages 14–19, \( n = 126 \)) evaluate 6 grading practices that differed in how students might demonstrate competence.

When considering how to maximize student learning, most adolescents said that science teachers should see themselves as models who demonstrate the scientific method and then encourage students to design their own studies. Two additional practices, lecturing about correct and incorrect theories and helping students invent their own theories, were ranked differently for controversial topics such as the origin of life and noncontroversial topics such as what causes the phases of the moon. For controversial topics, adolescents were highly suspicious of attempts to determine the correctness of someone’s theory, saw teachers’ role as one of facilitating independent thought and evaluation, and were unwilling to assume that classes should reach consensus on which views were correct. For non-controversial topics, most adolescents said that teachers could give lectures on different theories along with factual evidence about the value of such theories, expect students to remember which theory is correct, and show students how to work like scientists.

Adolescents’ beliefs about grading practices clearly distinguished practices for fostering learning from those for evaluating performance. Most adolescents believed that teachers should encourage students to report non-controversial findings in a manner that scientists would, but were open to many more possibilities for expression (e.g., artistic and literary expressions of knowledge) when the topic was controversial. According to these participants, students’ satisfaction with school, an important part of adolescent mental health, would be fostered when teachers were sensitive to the types of knowledge to be acquired when designing teaching and grading practices. Adolescents differed in how important it was for teachers to expect them to practice the scientific method, remember current scientific positions, or invent their own theories. Nevertheless, everyone introduced constructs relevant to moral engagement when justifying their decisions.

Effects of moral engagement on agency. Adolescents’ beliefs about how school ought to be organized have been connected with general life goals through two moral engagement pathways (Figure 1; Thorkildsen, Golant, & Richesin, 2007). Life goals that balance personal and communal concerns were associated with a strong sense of agency to work hard. These goals were also negatively associated with a sense of agency to cheat or take shortcuts in schoolwork, indicating sensitivity to the moral consequences of such actions. Unbalanced life goals (either highly communal or individualistic) were better than no goals, but adolescents following these pathways reported stronger endorsements of cheating or taking shortcuts in their work. Put simply, adolescents who felt connected to society reported stronger and less cynical levels of academic participation.
Assistance From Parents and Educators

How can families and schools foster moral engagement and agency to work hard? During the course of everyday conversations, parents and educators have a great deal of influence on adolescents’ beliefs about the world. Adolescents as well as society benefit when caregivers incorporate ethical discussions into everyday routines. Adolescents are more effective at hiding their reactions to adult messages than they were as children, but educators frequently hear them offer positive reports of their parents’ views, and parents often hear teachers’ opinions strongly endorsed at home. When adults purposefully organize conversations about controversial questions, they help adolescents formulate enduring moral standards that can influence behavior even when no one is available to notice. However, like adults, adolescents lead busy lives. Coordinating a complex schedule of classes, homework, and extra-curricular obligation can be a challenge. Thus, parents and educators must often bear the responsibility to initiate such discussions. Four suggestions are offered for initiating and organizing such conversations.

Introduce Ethical Dilemmas as a Part of Everyday Communication

Educators can facilitate ethical conversations by describing common moral dilemmas that are salient in the disciplines and the curriculum they teach. In doing so, they point out the moral complexities inherent in a broad range of situations and help adolescents recognize the prevalence of ethical questions; interesting moral and intellectual dilemmas are everywhere. Families can reinforce the lessons introduced in school by asking adolescents to remember and translate these ideas into discussions. Such discussions can be aligned with meals, incorporated into travel to and from events, or planned for morning or evening homework sessions. As well, parents can also begin with topics that correspond to adolescents’ existing responsibilities, a strategy that may improve adolescents’ abilities to meet the demands of their jobs as students and as family members. Establishing regular routines for starting and timing ethical conversations encourages adolescents to introduce more personal, sensitive ethical dilemmas when these inevitable issues arise and well before small problems become large ones. Adolescents learn to think like Maria who, when explaining why she told her mother about her sexual activity, said, “I couldn’t not tell my mom! I just couldn’t!”

Ask Plenty of Questions, Even if They Are Very Leading Questions

A second influential strategy concerns adults’ roles in conversations with adolescents. Parents seem to have a marked effect on adolescents’ moral reasoning when they adopt gentle styles of asking questions in a supportive manner,
and this logic could be extended to include student-teacher interactions (Walker & Taylor, 1991). Speech acts can be grouped into one of six categories. Speech could be (1) representational when requesting a youth’s opinions, paraphrasing what was said, asking clarifying questions, or checking comprehension; (2) supportive when it is encouraging, reflecting active listening, or adding humor that suggests empathy; (3) informative when adding opinions, indicating agreement, requesting change, or indicating a desire for closure; (4) operational when it directly critiques, challenges, or offers counterconsiderations to youth; (5) interfering when introducing distractions, refusals, devaluing statements, distortions, or other forms of hostility; or (6) unclear when a person mumbles or utters incomplete sentences. Most conversations probably involve a range of categories, but some styles are more effective than others in showing respect for the speaker as well as the listener.

When these interaction styles were compared to moral reasoning scores over time, adolescents seemed to increase the level of moral reasoning when their parents used representational and supportive speech (Walker & Taylor, 1991). Adolescents did not show as much growth when adult speech was overly informative, operational, or interfering; perhaps because adults appeared to offer unhelpful lectures, scathing critiques, or signs of disinterest. Eliciting adolescents’ ideas is challenging, and adults may feel compelled to add their opinions or offer more negative judgments of the ideas they hear. Nevertheless, when corrections are offered in the form of gentle requests for clarification, adolescents are less likely to feel emotionally defensive and may take more responsibility for their beliefs.

Offer Opportunities for Self-Expression

The final strategy is especially critical for ensuring that adolescents find time for personal reflection. Most adolescents learn best from conversations by actively participating and then reflecting on the fairness and usefulness of their experiences. As an 8th grader in one of our studies explained,

Each person in this world has something to teach someone else. It doesn’t matter what it is. It could be negative or positive. You could teach somebody something. I mean you could teach ‘em how to yell properly. If they’re like, ‘Hey, come here!’ you’re like, ‘No. Cover your hands together so your voice throws out like this.’ Each person on this world can teach somebody something that they don’t know.

When adolescents cannot share positive ideas, they may teach the negative things they do understand. With development, adolescents discover
a diverse array of personal values, and conversations about self-expression and personal reflection can help them evaluate their choices. Adolescents may not ask for help as they struggle for greater autonomy, but adults can still offer guidance on how to formulate personal values, express those values, and strengthen identities.

**Moral Engagement and Mental Health**

When adults thoughtfully organize opportunities for adolescents to assert and defend their opinions, they encourage the formation of personal standards. By asking leading questions that offer information while requesting feedback, adults can influence adolescents’ decision-making skills and knowledge about the world. Regular conversations about ethical questions evident in the school curriculum or in family events teach adolescents to detect small considerations before they become large problems and to visualize multiple perspectives for each dilemma.

Mental health is facilitated by consciously considering how personal standards are formulated and when moral standards guide motivational intentions. We know that adolescents’ personal standards play a key role in their engagement and that in turn directs their sense of agency (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). We also know that by ignoring daily moral dilemmas, adolescents can undermine their awareness of the ethical implications of their actions and nurture a sense of moral disengagement.

There is also some evidence to suggest that even when adolescents are aware of their standards, they may behave in contradictory ways. Contradictions in adolescents’ commitment to groups, for example, are evident in research on exclusion (Thorkildsen, Reese, & Corsino, 2002). Many adolescents are highly engaged in exclusionary behavior yet they may differ in whether they become preoccupied with issues of safety or see exclusion as an acceptable way to preserve norms of their own group and those that differentiate their group from others. Promoting values that respect the diversity they experience everyday, adolescents in urban settings commonly reject the idea of excluding people with dissenting opinions or who are inclined to reinforce societal prejudices. However, these same students can be quick to rely on exclusion as an acceptable means of keeping members from other groups at bay or maintaining solidarity within a group. These and related findings suggest that adolescents’ participation in school and feelings of success are also affected by the values they see promoted. The stress of experiencing rejection may be alleviated by regular fairness discussions on how to maximize everyone’s contribution to society. Regular conversations about the moral implications of such contradictory behavior may facilitate changes in behavior and preserve positive, achievement-focused levels of academic participation for all types of learners. As adolescents learn about their strengths and where those might be valued in the world, it also seems important to help them retain at least some commitment to continuing education.

In urban settings, adolescents negotiate a complex array of ethical dilemmas and need at least one adult who will thoughtfully listen, avoid trite comments about growing pains, and help them think through the multifaceted dimensions of the ethical dilemmas they face. Starting small, with themes that can be found in the curriculum of particular courses, allows adolescents and their caregivers to include relevant ethical questions in daily conversations. In time, such discussions facilitate the generation of new ideas and strategies for facing novel situations with excitement and energy. Society benefits when parents and educators remember that the coordination of knowledge in the engagement step of the appraisal process is only effective when adolescents gain access to situation-relevant knowledge and understand how to use what they know.

**References**


