Grappling

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"Moral" or "character" education is neither a discrete curriculum added as an afterthought nor an unreflective activity, such as "community service," that has never been probed for its meaning. Truly moral education, the authors maintain, is an intellectual undertaking that must infuse the entire school.

BY THEODORE R. SIZER AND NANCY FAUST SIZER

School is a frustration for Carl. He just can’t see the good it does him. Even more, he can’t see the good he does it. In social studies, the teacher tells him which American Presidents were the greatest. At least she also tells him exactly why. His parents say he should be grateful for that; they only got to memorize the list, never to hear the explanations — so it’s more interesting to think about. Still, he’d like to have the chance to tell her why he thinks a President who manages to avoid a war is as good as one who leads a nation in a war.

In math, he’s told that there is one right answer and one way to get to that right answer. In English, he’s told that the music lyrics he dotes on are inferior poetry. Even when he is asked to write, he’s told how many paragraphs he should use to get his ideas across to "the reader." Which reader? Wouldn’t it matter who he or she was?

And when his teacher takes his class to the computer room only to find a substitute there who doesn’t know how to run the new machines, Carl is not allowed to read the computer manual so that he can help to get the class started. He tries to argue that he’s done this before — at home and even at school — and that he and his classmates need the time in the lab if they are to finish their projects. But he gets a little too near to rudeness, and the teacher, visibly upset, cuts him off. “I don’t know what’s happened to kids these days,” she says to us as she turns the class back toward her classroom to wait out the period. “They’re so irresponsible.”

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In fact, this last situation requires some deeper consideration. There is, of course, no guarantee that Carl could have figured out how to run the new machines and thus saved the time for his classmates and his teacher. It’s hard to predict how much time his grappling would have taken or what its outcome would have been. The problem could have been “solved” on a superficial level, or it might have needed a lot more work. Carl’s energy might have given out; he might even have damaged the equipment. Nor is there any excuse for the rudeness that those who know more than others about technology — or any other subjects — often display.

Still, Carl had been treated as if he were an empty vessel, as if his skills and his opinions were of no value to those around him. In the computer room, he was told that there was nothing that he or anyone else could do. Instead, they were all to go back to their classroom and act as if nothing had happened. The result was an intellectual and a moral vacuum.

Why does an intellectual vacuum so often lead to a moral one as well? Schools exist for children, but children are often seen as the school’s clients, as its powerless people. They are told that they are in school not because of what they know but because of what they don’t know. All over the world, powerless people lose the instinct to help, because they are so often rebuffed. Yet, even if he had ultimately been unsuccessful, struggling with the computer manual would have been a good use of Carl’s mind. He would have been fulfilling the real purpose of schooling: to equip himself to be of use both to himself and to others. He would have used what he already knew to reach out and learn more about how computers work. And he would have put himself on the line in a good cause.

Putting oneself on the line may be valuable, but it invites the kind of criticism that is rarely applied to the young. Raising the young is an exquisitely tricky business. A fiftyish father grumped to us about his daughter who was just graduating from high school. The young woman had announced to her parents that she was determined to become a writer. “A writer?” her dad snorted to us. “What would she write about? She doesn’t know anything.”

The young woman was full of passion. She liked to string words out, playing with them. She wrote exclusively about her own world, casting it as a revelation. She labored hard in English courses and had had several intense pieces published in the school’s literary magazine. She had skimmed over her other courses, doing only the minimum. Nonetheless, she was an honors student. She surely would get a book award at graduation and deservedly so.

And yet her dad had a telling point. Behind his daughter’s enthusiasms was glibness. Her skill was admirable, and her joy in the application of that skill was palpable. Her ability to describe her own thoughts and feelings was unusual. But the young woman did not even know that she knew relatively little, that there was important knowledge that required a broader context than her own life.

The father, caught in the practical demands of earning a living and tired of years of teenage hubris, is understandably cautious. But if he is smart, he will keep his concerns to himself. The energy, even the presumption, of the young writer should not be reined in just because so much of it is based on self-absorption and naïveté. Instead, in taking herself seriously and wanting to write for an ever-widening audience, she will be motivated to take an increased interest in the ways of the world. Time will tell.

In case after case, this is how we have seen growing up work. A student’s hope and sense of agency are often dependent on her belief that there is something she can do that is valued by others. Not just other kids, but adults as well. And not empty “self-esteem building activities,” but the outcome of her best efforts, in which she has real confidence. From that point on, talent intertwines constantly with content, as the student challenges herself to perform at higher levels for a broader audience.

And so it is with learning the habits of civil behavior. The skills are important. Showing restraint. Being willing to listen. Having empathy. Feeling responsible for something and some people beyond oneself and one’s personal coterie of friends. Being nice. Getting along in one’s daily interactions.

But there must be more. Most interactions in life are complex; more than talent and good habits are needed to address them well. Few are mastered by merely applying a slogan such as “Just say no.” Context is critical if not crucial. The thoughts and resultant actions of, say, a Polish-German day laborer working near Auschwitz in 1944 — a person who sees the full trains come and the empty trains go — might be appreciably different from the conclusions about the Holocaust reached by an outraged American teenager sitting in an unthreatened high school classroom 50 years later. It will help the teenager to absorb the complexity of the situation if he can reflect as if from the shoes of the laborer.
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not necessarily to agree, but to empathize and to understand. In this Second World War moment there is powerful stuff: the particulars of a situation, in necessarily exquisite and painful detail. That stuff, if well and carefully considered, provides the perspective that is ultimately the heart of truly moral decisions. Educators call this content.

The habits of civil behavior can do much to bring safety to a school's halls. But the meanings of civil behavior are much tougher to present. They transcend one's immediate environment. When fully and painstakingly constructed, they provide a distant mirror, the meaning of one's immediate condition viewed against a sweep of human and environmental experience, past and present.

One has to grapple with those meanings. If not, "behavior" is reduced to glib catchwords that provoke little more than periodic puffs of self-righteousness. A curriculum rich in content will teach young people that important matters of sensitive living have everything to do with hard, substantive, and often agonizingly painful thought. The students will write plays or stories or imagined memoirs that will help them to get at the considerations inside that hypothetical day laborer's head.

Grappling is necessarily a balancing act. One tries to do what one has never done before and so learns more about what one wants to do. The reader's sense of his own power is built up by letting him try to understand the computer manual so the class can go forward. The writer's humility and appreciation of context are built up by asking her to take on another's complex particulars of a situation, in necessarily exquisite and painful detail. That stuff, if neglected, was the mother who had left them and the keys in the car while she went to an exercise salon, how unobtrusive was the gas station attendant who sold them gas without noticing how young they were. No one wondered at the sheer competence lurking like a shadow underneath the youngsters' foolishness.

We're selling our children short when we believe that grappling is beyond them. In fact, most of them are engaging in dilemmas of intense seriousness while we're looking the other way. Most teenagers have watched one or another substance be abused, heard adults who are important to them drink each other's beverage, and wondered why so many are poor in a rich country. Many have been mugged figuratively — and some literally. The teenage mother or caregiver has been a fixture for centuries. Most modern wars have been fought (albeit neither started nor ended) by teenage males. To treat adolescents as delicate flowers unable to act and think is a costly pretense, as patronizing as it is wasteful. Young people can do things, and they do do things — now. Older folks should accept that fact and labor hard to provide the perspective that can affect, in a principled manner, the way that young people inform those actions that, willy-nilly, they will take.

Adolescents are no different from the rest of us. They resist mandates issued from on high, and most of them won't be forced into good habits. But they are willing to talk about moral choices, and they can decide that some courses of action are better than others. In fact, they are eager to formulate opinions on these matters, as long as they are trusted to take their time and examine their assumptions as carefully as they can. They can do this in school, by considering examples — some literary, some historical, some scientific — that are interesting and nuanced and in which a human must choose between possible actions. When they work it all through in a variety of assignments, they learn much about literature and history and about the human condition and the multiple ways in which it might develop. All of this considering is what helps the teenager to deepen his or her understanding of values and thus to construct a personal moral code.

This last and most private step in the process is the most important one. Finally, the test of a good school is how its students behave when no one is looking, how they are in the mall as well as in the school's classrooms and corridors.

Most teachers are fond of the word "engagement," because it means that the students are really taking an interest in the work that the teacher has designed for them. Grappling, however, goes one step further. It presumes that the student has something to add to the story. Either hypothetically or actually, the student is asked to offer his or her input.

The input may be in the form of added information. High school students who are analyzing the racial and ethnic disagreements in their city may be asked to research immigration patterns, previous political relationships, or a number of other factors in order to get a clearer picture of what is in the minds of those who are involved in contemporary problems. The resultant information can be scrutinized carefully by their classmates, by their teacher, and by outside groups, both for the way it was gathered and for what it means. If it was gathered in the traditional ways of research, it can reinforce habits that are basically good ones: honesty, freedom from bias, the use of orderly procedures, and so forth. If it was gathered in unconventional ways, such as through chats with one's highly prejudiced uncle, those ways can be analyzed and even justified, at least on certain grounds. Once gathered, the research can be presented in graphs and photographs, essays and statistics, with much discussion of the way each format contributes to an overall understanding of the situation.

The students' input may also be in the form of opinion. Most high school stu-
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dents spend a lot of time considering such matters as pushing and shoving — or even more violent activities — and whether they are dangerous or are an inevitable part of life. They think about deterrence: when and how much a threatened punishment keeps them from doing something. They think about authority and about what its best and worst uses ought to be. They think about ethnicity and about how much it influences a person's overall approach to things. They question the religion that has been important to their family, the grandmother who believes that they ought to write thank-you notes, and the teacher who takes offense at sloppy work. They are at an unsettled time in their lives, while the many different thoughts they are having start to form themselves into opinions that they may keep all their lives.

We should be grateful for their confusion: it is part of life to think for oneself, and nature needs that little slip between generations. We can learn to live with and even harness (though that may be a "bad word" and suggest a "restrictive" concept) the energy of teenagers. The thoughts that are roiling around in the students' heads should be invited out and put to work. They should be applied to schoolwork, the better to develop and grow in the sunlight, the better to be made subject to others' questions.

Schoolwork is about violence and deterrence and authority and tradition and behavior. We should invite the students' input into the subject of whether the Civil War could have been avoided, of whether the southern states' desire to secede from the Union was legitimate self-determination or a dangerous threat to the very concept of democracy. School yard tensions and even family regroupings are not precisely analogous to the Civil War, of course. But the students' opinions will be refined and strengthened not by avoiding such analogies but by pressing to make them more accurate and appropriate. Insisting that the students tackle important and demonstrably relevant ideas, such as the meaning of justice, can be a tonic. It is one very important reason to be in school. And the students want more of it.

Text-based discussions are also amenable to grappling. For all sorts of reasons, many contemporary high school students read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a story of race, guilt, innocence, and courage set in the American South of the 1930s. The story shows the importance of evidence and argument. It portrays raw courage and the toughness of honesty. It is the sort of tale that usually provokes moral outrage and with that outrage the attention and engagement of high school students.

The litany of good questions that can arise is endless. To ponder them is to wrestle with specific and carefully described ideas that are freighted with values. Teachers can catch the heat that arises from the careful discussion of issues such as those raised by *To Kill a Mockingbird* and use it to deepen the talk, to broaden the questions, and to demand that the students use the text to support their arguments. Circling back over familiar ground, asking new sorts of questions about that ground, and looking for every scrap of data are necessary steps in building the habit of thoughtful grappling. A student who grapples is made aware of this complexity. And if there is an explicit assumption on the part of the school and its teachers that this sort of grappling is as worthy as it is complex, the student may get into the habit of the struggle.

When the students stick to a text such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* long enough to understand the abstractions in it, they are likely to apply that understanding to the next text they encounter. The exercise can thus lead a class into many places, with the depth of study growing as the interest deepens. Careful grappling is its own reward; it leads to further grappling.

Fiction is particularly useful in this kind of discussion because it gets the students outside of themselves. It provides a new and unfamiliar setting to play out enduring issues and thus avoids the pressures of the immediate. The sense of suspense in the narrative draws in even those students who do not feel comfortable in moral discussions. History itself is stories, and the line between fiction and fact is a necessarily fuzzy one when it comes to the consideration of moral dilemmas. Questions about who writes history and why, about the role of ideas and of personality in communities, and about the varied and changing nature of government are also subject to debate. In science, there are many prominent moral questions in need of discussion, both on the basis of scientific evidence and on the basis of belief. One of the most important technological questions in our time is clearly "Just because we can do something, should we?" This is a particularly pressing question for adolescents. John F. Kennedy thought the answer was yes when it came to exploring space. The issues of developing and testing nuclear weapons, cloning animals and humans, and reaching children through the Internet, however, may lead to different answers.

One difference between grappling and other forms of learning is that, when the questions become the student's own, so do the answers. When simple curiosity about the birds visiting a winter feeder leads to questions about territory, sharing, cruelty, and the relationship between animals and humans, the process becomes a reality check. What is the evidence that some birds mate for life? That they return to the same feeder? How does this finding connect with other characteristics of birds? Is it real? Does it matter? If it matters, how am I affected? And finally and most important, How should I respond or behave? Should "last year's birds" have precedence over newcomers? Who am I to decide such things?

As adults, we must really be interested in what the students' "answers" are. If they are shallow, if they are biased, the teacher needs to help students develop them further — but not necessarily replace them neatly with the teacher's own conclusions. The students may sense the teacher's personal views and be greatly influenced by them. However, they will also see that issues of weight are complex and that there are interpretations about...
which thoughtful, decent people can differ.

Few issues of value can be persuasively reduced to sharply painted absolutes. Even the dictum “Thou shalt not kill,” for example, is a conflicted matter for those in the armed services or those in the part of the criminal justice system charged with carrying out legal executions. Depending on one's definition of when life begins, the issue of killing may arise in connection with abortion. There are few easy answers to central moral concerns. This is why young people must be given practice in grappling with them in an informed and principled manner as possible.

In addition to providing additional information and offering informed opinion, a third kind of input that students can provide is their skills. Why should the local malls be the only agencies that know how to appreciate responsible teenagers? Besides the ability to do research, students have mathematical, artistic, writing, and speaking skills that can be valued in a complex world. Many high schools now have peer mediation programs, and students are learning much about identifying one another’s needs and interests and finding common ground. These skills can be applied to a wider arena: at first in hypothetical role plays and under close supervision, but later with a somewhat more autonomous structure and in real situations, such as student-run businesses that raise money for the poor.

Unfortunately, the sort of grappling described here is all too rare in American high schools. Few teachers have been offered the incentives or provided the support necessary to gain a deep grasp of their subjects. But a good deal of knowledge and authority on the teacher’s part are usually required to teach in the interrogatory manner necessary to provoke the students to grapple. The larger the question, the more likely that the students will grow frustrated, at least at first. Only a confident coach can help his or her students move through that frustration to a greater clarity. It is much easier to give a lecture on the three causes of the French Revolution than to question the nature of revolution itself. The conventional metaphor for education is one of delivery, not of constructive, generative provocation. To teach grappling, teachers have to model it, which is difficult to do in a typical high school.

There are other factors as well. Given the sweeping nature of high school curricula — a bit of this and much of that, Cleopatra to Clinton, the history of China in two weeks, all branches of biology in a year — few schools are able to allow the time necessary for students to grapple. As long as the end result of high school is measured in “coverage” and as long as “coverage” is assessed by measuring the student’s memory, there will be no time for students’ own questions. Inquisitiveness, skepticism, and imagination are rarely priorities for state “curriculum frameworks” or, in all too many cases, for standardized tests. Indeed, the spiraling of ideas, the testing and retesting and testing again of hypotheses, the unpredictability of any one class, the messiness of this kind of inquiry will put the bravest and most effective teachers’ students at a certain kind of short-term risk.

Another factor concerns deportment. High schools are such crowded places that certain norms seem only sensible. One is that people should listen to one another talk, which requires that only one person talk at a time. Most often, that person is the teacher, toward whom most students give the greatest respect. In many classrooms, the teacher has to shut a student up in order to open him up; that is, in order to give him the time to digest what is being said by the teacher or by other students.

In a classroom that puts a premium on developing ideas, everybody’s hand would be up. No matter how pleased a teacher might be by this level of engagement, by the time it was any one student’s turn to speak, any sense of coherence would be lost. Loosening up this structure by working in groups or by tolerating a certain amount of chaos would upset a lot of people. Some would be those students inside the classroom who need a degree of order and predictability to learn or who get intimidated by their classmates’ ideas or even by their confidence. Other upset people might well be the folks who walk the school’s halls. From such a distance, it is hard to tell the difference between excitement and cheekiness. Sometimes, it’s the teacher whose initial convictions about the best kind of learning have been shaken or have put him on the line. He might be “grappling” with finding a new job by next spring.

And finally, many schools are afraid of the political ramifications of any sort of teaching that brings to the surface matters of value, matters that are often controversial and thus threatening. What if Susanna refuses to go to church on Sunday because she’s offended by what she learned about abuses in the medieval church? What if Carlos can’t sleep because he’s upset about a predicted rise in the sun’s temperature? What if Derek starts lecturing his parents about their smoking? If students take their education into their own hearts and begin to act according to their new discoveries, the dislocations in their own and their families’ lives may well be difficult. The students will inevitably make some mistakes, and the school will be a convenient scapegoat.

Grappling with the tough issues is hard work. No matter how smart they sound,
most students are new to the game of dealing with controversy. Recently, we observed a class that was learning about the Bill of Rights by discussing a case that involved downloading pornography, how much privacy a student should expect in school, who should decide what reasonable proof is, who has responsibility for the safety of students, and a host of other issues. One couldn’t help but be struck not just by the students’ commitment to the discussion but also by their skill at handling complex concepts, at looking at the background of the case, at imagining outcomes had the case been handled differently. One young man had an opinion on nearly every aspect; he had an opinion on nearly every aspect; he had much more than the sophistication that he'd demonstrated earlier. He was well-spoken and seemed confident and persuasive. Definitely a lawyer — and a good one — in the making, we thought. At the end of the class, though, he jumped up and, with a big smile, announced, “But what do we know? We’re only children.”

This young man wasn’t undercutting the sophistication that he'd demonstrated so convincingly earlier. Indeed, he was adding to it by admitting that he had more than the sophistication that he'd demonstrated earlier. He was confident and persuasive. Definitely a lawyer — and a good one — in the making, we thought. At the end of the class, though, he jumped up and, with a big smile, announced, “But what do we know? We’re only children.”

What these concerned adults leave out, however, is the dimension that each learner has to add to the material in order really to carry it in his or her head. There has to be a shred of interest present already on which the talented teacher can build. The interest is based on a shared psychological identity (such as seventh-graders often feel with the rebellious American colonists struggling to get out from under a “mother country”), so be it. Building on these existing interests seems more important than presenting each unit in the recommended number of days.

When the external tests are administered, however, the honest grappling that the teacher has encouraged may end up harming her students. Other teachers may have prepared their students better for the tests by sticking to the prescribed curriculum, which “covered” immigration and railroad regulation in the same number of days. However, by emphasizing accuracy — by which they mean the ability to sort through semi-right clues to get to the all-right answer on a machine-graded test — to the exclusion of all other aspects of the material, those teachers (and the principals and parents who are flouting them to get the test scores up) are neglecting an important part of the process.

The material that stays in a student's head only until the test will never make it into his or her outlook. When it is in a student’s outlook — when he thinks, for example, of the losses and gains that immigration brought to those who engaged in it, or when she compares the immigration experience with a recent move that her family made — it gains moral importance.

When a student has gotten his juices up in some way, he will think about such material outside of school, argue about it at the dinner table, take a book about it out of the library, choose the topic for his next paper. Accuracy will start to matter, but only if it follows engagement, only if the student has put himself on the line. Only then will he be capable of making his dates right or if he finds himself changing his interpretation of something. He has started to grapple with a question of more importance to him, and it may well emerge into a lifelong interest and a lifelong habit.

Few schools place a high value on questioning, even though it is the habit that is most likely to lead to consequential scholarship and responsible adulthood. Schools are such crowded places; crowded not only with restless bodies but with parents’ dreams for their children. No wonder so much emphasis is put on order. But order discourages questioning. Surrounded by the disorderliness of too many children, most teachers find themselves waiting for 3 p.m., waiting for Friday, and waiting for vacation — all with a longing bordering on obsession, which makes them think in short-run rather than in long-run terms. In such a context, questions look messy and even rude. Besides, the students’ own questions will take a lot more time to answer than the teachers’ questions will, because the answers to most teachers’ questions can be found on page 554 of the textbook. Better, most school systems seem to say, to present a watery diet of philosophical or psychological absolutes as a way to avoid conflict while appearing to attend to students’ education in matters of value.

But more and more schoolpeople see things differently. They recognize that if humans the moral is embedded in the intellectual, that thinking hard — grappling — in an informed and careful way is the most likely route to a principled and constructive life. The good person has both passion and restraint, respect for evidence and patience when evidence is not readily at hand.

These matters can be deeply embedded in the full academic curriculum. “Moral” or “character” education is neither a discrete curriculum added as an afterthought nor an unreflective activity, such as “community service,” that has never been probed for its meaning. Truly moral education is an intellectual undertaking that must infuse the entire school. And it must be led by adults who know things, who themselves are regular grappling with all the work and messiness and confusion that rich content entails.