Why do children lie: How can we foster a more honest future?

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Abstract

No one likes to be lied to. Dishonesty, betrayal, and deceit are characteristics that harm friendships and relationships of any kind. These characteristics change the way a person is perceived by others as well as how they perceive others. A person, who fails to be truthful, no matter what the condition, loses credibility. This stifles personal growth as well as the growth of relationships. So why do people lie? When does lying start? Do people become more honest as they get older? How can we foster a more honest future? These questions fueled this study in a mission to build an honest future. In an elementary school setting one is subject to a variety of shades of the truth. From cheating on homework or a test to who was first on line, it is difficult to decipher perceptions from reality and draw accurate conclusions. Journaling about these situations allowed this researcher to look at the facts and reflect on what happened, think about the individual perceptions of those involved, and assess whether appropriate action was taken or if it could have been handled in a better way. In a search for more answers the researcher met with colleagues including the school psychologist to discuss the topic of honesty. The school psychologist held sessions with children known for being dishonest for “lunch bunch” and research was gathered through observations of this group. Through discussion and literature review many factors were determined to cause lying in children confirming many personal beliefs and findings. Perceptions play a much larger part in honesty than the researcher originally thought creating questions of accuracy in personal research and the research of others. The acceptability of lying was discovered and helped the researcher to understand the complexity of lie verse truth. Most importantly there are methods proven to help children to be more honest.
INTRODUCTION

A majority of society would agree that honesty is an important quality for one to have in life. Trustworthiness, fairness, respect, and responsibility are all characteristics which stem from honesty and are important to have. People with these characteristics are able to see both sides of the coin and though we might make mistakes we can learn from them. I think it is fair to say no one likes to be lied to. Dishonesty, betrayal, and deceit are characteristics that can do more than just harm friendships or relationships of any kind. These qualities stifle growth and can will likely reap consequences later in life.

The interest in this topic started early on. I was not a truthful child. I like to think I had a creative imagination and fabricated stories, which was true, sometimes. When push came to shove though I was so afraid of the consequences of my actions that I rather at least make an effort to get out of it. Through my teenage years I had a much different feeling about honesty. I learned how much people valued honesty and I did not want to be someone who others couldn’t confide in, grow close to, or trust. In my teaching career my interest in students honesty morphed into a mission.

During my first few years teaching I feared confrontation with the middle and high school students I worked with. I tried to avoid placing blame and to always state the facts and get to the bottom of the problem. This worked most of the time but there were many times where I knew I was being lied to and I could not get students to hold themselves accountable. This created a roadblock, one person’s word against another’s and it seemed like a lose-lose situation. The conversation would come to a stand still and therefore no lesson was learned and no conflict was resolved. I now realize I failed in these situations. Not because I did not have
the student’s best interest at heart, not for lack of trying, and certainly not for lack of understanding the situation but because I did not have the relationship or rapport with the students that made what I had to say matter to them. Even when I moved into the primary grades I struggled with student’s dishonesty. Students would blatantly lie to me or in my presence and I would react with such disappointment and even anger, but still no improvements were made.

A couple years ago I really started to put a lot of thought into how I would deal with situations regarding dishonesty. I put a few things into practice and started to see what worked. One of the first things I realized, also supported by my most recent research, was that lying is much more complicated than I initially thought. The cognitive ability of a child, their understanding of the facts, how they perceive the situation, their opinion, and intentions of self or others bring a mix of complications to the table.

There are many lessons learned through being honest. Lessons learned through taking responsibility for one’s actions, being accountable, and talking through how the situation could have been dealt with differently. It deepens the discussion and creates an opportunity to put all the cards on the table and rearrange them in a way that makes sense. How can we move forward if we are not willing to take responsibility for our actions? We have to present the cards to the student in conflict in a way that makes sense and opens the door for discussion. Reacting to the situation with disappointment or anger closes all these doors.

Through the literature review I learned that many of the decisions I have made and conclusions I have come to are supported by research. My biggest findings included children and their respect for boundaries when clearly stated as well the importance of the chemistry in their environment. By nature children are people pleasers and want to do the right thing but their intentions are easily swayed depending on their environment. By reading the research in the
articles and documents chosen for my lit review my findings went from big ideas to common sense. These articles also brought many other factors regarding honesty to light.

My initial thought was that honesty and dishonesty were pretty black and white. The truth is the truth and a lie is a lie, right? Well, maybe not. Let us also remember how important manners are and how we consistently tell children to think before they speak, be considerate of other people’s feelings, and if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all. These are coin terms we have all used and sound appropriate at the time, but when children follow these rules we become disenchanted with their behavior. When we ask a child why they did something and they don’t answer we assume they are being disrespectful. When a child tells the truth about not liking a certain food item cooked by someone we assume they are being rude. If a child makes their feelings known about not liking another student, sometimes for arguably good reason, we tell them they aren’t being nice. For a child learning about honesty these situations make understanding “truth” difficult. Is it ok to lie? If so, when?

The discussion of white lies is also one easily lost in translation. The saying goes, “A little white lie never hurt anyone.” Well, what one person perceives as a white lie may not be considered as such by another. The idea that these lies are harmless gives children the idea that lying is okay. At a certain age while children are still developing cognition this might be true but we create a larger grey area.

Making these realizations helped me understand how complex honesty is and in turn helped me fine tune my research question and hone in on what is really important. Lying is not okay and there is an appropriate way to deal with the aforementioned situations as a child’s cognition grows.
Though a majority of my findings correlate with the findings of multiple studies there were also many different perspectives that make sense to me but never crossed my mind. These research documents not only brought these situations to light but make me realize that adult’s perception of children’s cognition and honesty vary. This very likely skews results.

It has become more important to me to understand why children lie. I would like to have conversations with kids K-5 and explore these reasons. I am curious to see how these reasons change as students grow older. My mission of creating an honest future is part of my research question. But the overarching question I will be exploring is: What makes children lie, how can we foster a more honest future?

The articles I read for research were chosen for a few particular reasons: 1. The abstract had something in it that would give me better understanding of what makes children lie or tell the truth. 2. It revealed a point of view I never considered. 3. Well I just liked the title. Such as, “From little white lies to filthy liars: The Evolution Of Honesty And Deception in Young Children.” It made me giggle and I had to know more. I was surprised to find so much research done on the honesty of children. Many articles outside the field of education such as in law, sociology, psychology, developmental science, and even economics. One thing is clear. We know children lie, some better than others, but they are known to lie and researchers want to know why.
LITERATURE REVIEW

There were four main concepts taken from the literary review, which aided me in my research process: perceptions, threat conditions, acceptability of lying, and complexity of lie verse truth. Some of these factors I never would have considered had I not had the opportunity to read these articles. The common thread throughout the five articles was the discussion of threat levels. Threat levels will be discussed in more detail throughout the literary review but the affect of varying threats may contradict common thought.

We will begin the discussion of threat levels, dissonance, self-perception, and honesty in children as we review the article, “Dissonance, self perception, and honesty in children. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.” In this research article Lepper (1973) tests a paradigm involving young children’s compliance to adult wishes. Lepper and fellow researchers tested second graders, equally boys and girls, in two separate sessions with different methods thought to encourage children to either tell the truth or to lie. The first experiment was the “forbidden toy” experiment where children were asked to rank the toys from most favorite to least favorite. Were asked not to touch or play with the second ranked toy and then left alone in the room. The second was a bowling type game consisting a rolling bolt and of lights which were thought to note the accuracy of the bolt. The subjects didn’t know these lights were preprogrammed all to read out the same score of 33 points, two points shy of the score necessary to receive a reward. Subjects were responsible for keeping their own score by placing marbles on a tray or sorts.

All six groups were subjected to what was considered high, medium, or low threat conditions and their self-perception was assessed. The threat conditions consisted of statements by the experimenter such as, “If you play with second ranked toy I would be a little annoyed (or very upset and very annoyed) with you.” The self-perception assessment asked second graders
to take cards labeled from “very much like me” to “not at all like me” and place them with adjectives ranking from honest to dishonest and other general honesty items.

I was drawn to this study for obvious reasons and though the material was difficult to get through I think I managed to understand it correctly. Though I hesitated to read this study because of the time it took place I was interested to know the findings. This study is dated 1973 and they discussed another “forbidden toy” experiment conducted in 1966. Though the results of the initial study are not discussed I am curious to know if the findings are similar. I was a little surprised to discover at the time of this study most children were more likely to be truthful under low threat conditions. In my own research I have discovered that putting a child at ease and discussing an issue with them is more productive than yelling and screaming would ever be. Even showing anger or a reaction with any kind causes students to shut down.

My situations have differed as the environment was not controlled and I am often deflating or figuring out what actually occurred. The nature of children apparently hasn’t changed in the last forty years. If they feel threatened they will protect themselves by whatever means necessary. They are too young to understand the importance of learning the lessons at hand and too naïve to know their chances of getting caught are greater than getting away with it.

It was interesting to me to think of second graders as being able to correctly identify themselves as an honest and truthful person. I think a lot of it has to do with their environment too. If they discuss the nature of their honesty in one group of people I would think they would try to live up to that standard. If they were removed form that situation maybe their behavior would change. I am consistently surprised by the behavior of children outside of the school setting. I hear and see my students involve in after school activities carrying on and being
incredibly disrespectful to the point where I can’t take it any more. I have to intervene or at least let them know I heard or saw what they said or did, and that I do not approve.

Understanding that we can encourage truth telling as well as lying is the first step in fostering an honest future. Knowing children can be influenced in a positive manner to be truthful makes me take one step back and look at the lie being told. I need to try to understand the “truth” behind lying. What makes a lie, a lie and how do children learn to lie? These questions were explored in Talwar and Crossman’s 2011 study, “From little white lies to filthy liars: The Evolution Of Honesty And Deception in Young Children. Advancement in Child Development and Behavior.

This journal discusses paradox of lying and the findings of Piaget’s findings from a similar study in the early to mid 1900’s. It brings to light the many different types of lies there are, some more socially acceptable than others. Talwar and Crossman (2001) state, “It is true that age directly correlates with the development and discovery of the appropriateness of lying. Children as young as three defined a statement as a lie solely based on factuality—incorrect statements made with good intentions were deemed as lies. It is not until ages 6-10 that the children start to consider the speakers beliefs when characterizing the honesty of their statements.”

Another study, which was referred to by Talwar and Crossman, but conducted by Peterson, Peterson, and Seeto, was thought to contradict Piaget’s findings. The author of the research journal describes the findings as suggesting children feel lies are bad whether they are punishable or not. However the same study found that children’s sole motivation for not lying was the consequential punishment. I feel there are two different things being discussed here.
One discussion being that of understanding what is a lie and what is a mistake, or a lapse of judgment- the other being the decision making process being made by the accused child.

Lying is complicated and in my practice it is all about creating an environment where the child feels safe coming clean about the lie. This does not mean that the child shouldn’t be held responsible for the lie. This article made me think differently about the complexity of lying. It is difficult for children to learn the difference between antisocial (self-preserving) and prosocial (told for the benefit of another) lies. These terms are all new to me but I am amazed at how much of what I already believe has been researched and has some credibility.

The article continues to discuss developing concepts of lies, the development of lie telling behavior, and social factors influencing the development of lies. In addition to the antisocial and prosocial examples given throughout the ages, there are examples of complexity of these lies, which develop along with the child’s cognitive ability. The discussion of cognitive ability and complexity of lies are further discussed in Nunez, Kehn, and Wright (2010).

Nunez, Kehn, and Wright’s objective in this study was to examine how context impacts adults’ perception of children, and to which extent context combined with varying age and gender of children impacts these perceptions. Nunez, Kehn and Wright specifically explored the perceptions of honesty and cognitive ability of children in the context of sexual abuse cases verse when no context was given. They define honesty as knowing the difference between truth and lie, being trusted by adults being reliable, and honest. Their definition of cognitive ability is having good memory for events and being able to attend and concentrate. The perceptions of the jurors in this study changed my feeling of the accuracy of other studies. I think perception plays a large part in the result of a study, even if attempts are made to omit this occurrence. When the
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facts are the primary focus we cannot control individual perceptions of those facts creating quite the variable.

For a child to be perceived as credible, they need to be perceived as honest and cognitively able to remember events. Depending on the case credibility should be based on which of the two aspects, honesty or cognitive ability, are most pertinent to the case in question. “Cases in which the child witnessed an event and has to recall the details of the crime, cognitive ability will most likely be more important in determining the credibility of the witness than honesty. In these cases older children should be perceived as more credible than younger children (Goodman et al., 1984, 1987). In cases of child abuse it was stated by Nunez, Kehn and Wright a child’s honesty would be the determining aspect of credibility. Though studies of child witnesses have found that jurors’ perceptions of child credibility are often affected by factors such as the age and gender of the child witness, the gender of the juror also plays a part.

This portion of the study was what made me think there might be a difference in my perception of the situations happening in my classroom and what actually happened. The results of the study regarding the context such as age and gender of the victim, offender or the age and gender of the party who reported the offense were interesting but I feel they lose credibility when transferring them into my classroom. I don’t discredit their findings in regard to their importance in the world. Terrible things happen, and it was even difficult for me to read about a hypothetical case but the research is important to help child abuse victims. The background knowledge collected by these researchers is what helped me open my eyes on the ideas of perception and how they might affect the results of what happens between student, parent, administrator and me as the teacher.
How do we remove perception from a study? Allow the subjects the opportunity to hold themselves accountable without observing them. Researchers, Bucciol and Piovesan, conducted an experiment at a summer camp in Italy with children ranging in age from 5 to 15 years. This field experiment focused on the development of honesty with age but also discusses the facts instead of drawing conclusions. The children were asked to flip a black and white coin, without being observed, and record the result. Children only received a prize if they reported the white outcome. Though researchers were not able to observe the coin toss they believed that if everyone reported honestly they should receive roughly equal outcomes. Children were not being observed and therefore could easily cheat.

The children were asked simple background information such as age, gender, school performance, number of siblings, and BMI. Students were then divided into two treatment groups. One was the Control Treatment (CT) group where the researchers avoided mentioning the possibility of cheating, but at the same time did not tell the not to cheat. The second group was the Reminder Treatment (RT) group where children were explicitly told the children not to cheat orally and in writing.

In the researchers sample 85% of the children in the CT group reported the white outcome. This is obviously higher than the predicted 50% but smaller than the 100% if everyone cheated. Bucciol and Piovesan felt these findings suggest: 1) some children cheat with the environment allows them to do so; 2) other children are honest even if this behavior is costly. In the RT group Bucciol and Piovesan found that by reminding children not to cheat reduces the probability by 18%. It should also be noted the effect if this reminder was significantly larger in girls.
These findings affected my thought process in a few ways. The most important note for me was that environment plays a huge role in a child’s honesty. It is not so much the cause of threat or consequence that causes a child to be honest or lie, it is whether or not a child has the opportunity to lie. If the conditions are set up in a way where a child feels free to do or say whatever they want, they are more likely to lie. If they know someone is watching or listening, they are more likely to do the right thing. Accountability increases honesty! If a child knows there will not be a consequence they are more likely to make poor decisions. This does not mean children will do hurtful, deceitful things just because they are alone but in a time of confrontation this increases the probability.

Through my mission I have thought about what might happen if more of society valued honesty as much as I do. We would have fewer national debts, a less corrupt government and for lack of a better way to say it, the world would be a better place. Well wouldn’t you know that Bucciol and Piovesan had the same thought? They quoted Mazar and Ariely (2006), who argued that dishonest actions are socially costly as they “contribute to the U.S. economy losing hundreds of millions of dollars in tax revenues, wages, and investment dollars, as well as hundreds of thousands of jobs each year.” They counter this quote with one that gives the hopeful ones some encouragement by pointing out that there are many economic activities that operate on an honor system such as the luggage claim at the airport, or hotels who allow guests to serve and record their own drinks. Bucciol and Piovesan describe this behavior as surprising, I prefer to describe it as hopeful.

After reading multiple studies about adult perceptions of children or about children lying to adults I was curious to know how if a child’s perception of an adult may affect a child’s truthful or lie-telling behavior. This may help to understand if liars develop naturally or if it is a
learned behavior. In my search to understand this I came across an article, “Follow the liar: the effects of adult lies on children’s honesty. Developmental Science.” Hays and Carver (2014) discuss the lack of research conducted on such topics and provide evidence of why it is worth looking into. We know children lie for a variety of reasons but most are aimed at concealing mistakes, often referred to as transgressions in research, and avoiding punishment. Adults lie to children regularly yet feel justified in doing do. How does this affect the development of a child’s honesty? It is well known in the world of education that children learn through modeling and imitation. From a child’s earliest days of life parents talk and behave in ways hoping the child will react, copy or respond their words or actions. What makes us think they won’t do the same regarding lie-telling behavior?

“Adults often lie to children as a way to control their behavior, to get them to cooperate, to control their emotions, or even because it seems easier than providing an accurate, but difficult explanation for a question the child may ask (Heyman et al., 2009). Though this is true of many parents there still parents who take the time to answer questions honestly, as hard as it might be at times. This behavior makes more sense to me and is how I feel I have conducted myself as an educator, aunt, and close family friend of young children. I understand that every parent is pushed to their breaking point and it might not always be easy but in times like this I think it is important to think about how lying to your child or any child can change their perception of others as well as their behavior regarding honesty. If a child knows they are being lied to it could alter the way they value honesty.

A child is more likely to adopt, or imitate, a modeled behavior if the model is similar to the observer with an admired status (Bandura, 1977), suggesting that a parent’s dishonest actions may be highly susceptible to imitation. This also made me think about the situations where
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children lie in the presence of other children. Maybe children make up stories, or other facts about themselves to impress the valued observer. The environment allows the dishonesty to take place and the child doesn’t perceive these made up stories as being harmful.

Hays and Carver hypothesized that lying to a child would increase the likelihood that the child would engage in dishonest behaviors. They tested a range of ages in order to assess developmental changes in the influence if adult lies on children. Children in each group were randomly assigned to either the ‘lie’ or ‘no lie’ condition. The children in the lie condition group were told a lie as a way to get them to the test room: “There is a huge bowl or candy in the next room, want to go get some?” Once in the room, the experimenter confessed to the child, “There’s not really any candy in here; I just said that because I wanted to you come play a game with me.” Children assigned to the no-lie group were asked, “There is a really fun game in the next room, want to go play?” with no mention of candy made.

The children were then seated with their back to the experimenter while two popular toys were brought out in succession. Each of these toys was accompanied by an audio clue. After hearing the clue the children were asked, “Who do you think it is? The third toy (target toy) was accompanied by an unassociated audio clue. As this target toy was brought out the experiment was interrupted with a pretend phone call used to pull the experimenter out of the room. The child was instructed not to peek at the toy and was left alone in the room for 90 seconds. When the experimenter returned the toy was covered and the child was told they could turn around. The experimenter then asked the child if they promised to tell the truth. Studies show reminding children to be honest significantly reduces lie-telling. The child was then asked: “When I was gone did you turn around and peek to look at the toy?”
The results showed, as the experimenters hypothesized, children who were lied to by the experimenter were more likely to lie than children who were not. Older children lied more than younger children. Pre-school aged children were just as likely to lie as if they were previously lied to as if they were not. I was interested to find out that some test results were omitted because five children (one school aged and four preschoolers) omitted to peeking even though they did not. Did this happen because the child felt like they were being blamed for something they did not do just by being asked to promise to tell the truth? Is it possible they did not understand what was being asked of them at one or more levels? In addition to the false confessions there were two children (one school aged and one preschooler) refused to promise to tell the truth. In my opinion that makes them guilty of peeking but the results were never disclosed. I am also interested by the child’s response of refusal. Was it because they knew they peeked and therefore were avoiding a situation of transgression? Or was it because they didn’t understand what it meant to “promise” or “tell the truth.” I think cognition plays an important role here.

Interestingly enough when discussing the occurrence of peeking, younger children were more likely to peek than older children. However, preschool aged children were just as likely to lie if they were previously lied to as if they were not. The innocence of the pre-schoolers or the lack of cognition development impacts the results of the test. Maybe the impact of the lying condition is null because the children of preschool age are more intrinsic than extrinsic regarding honesty.

The research I have read so far discusses a child’s response to a situation controlled by an adult. What would research find if both the test subject and test administrator were children? How would the results differ if the test subject perceived another child put the experiment in
place? If there was some way to make the test subject think the task was one requested solely of the child administrator I test results would differ since the playing fields are a bit more equal. The results might also change further if the child knows and values the child administrator verse not knowing them at all.

**METHODOLOGY**

Honesty is something I have been pondering in my personal and professional life for many years. As I started to journal in the beginning of my research experience I found many of my entries being self reflective and focusing on the honesty of my students. As I wrote about the day, experiences of my students and myself I noticed honesty came up a lot. My journal is full of stories where students lie, sometimes terribly, about things that didn’t really matter, for no reason and all. This would make me more frustrated than anything because I couldn’t get to the solution without fully understanding the problem. This was a waste of everyone’s time and I knew there had to be another way to omit the “he said, she said” of such arguments and get to the facts. Of course, conflict between classmates causes lying as each person attempts to defend himself or herself. I thought about this and decided the only way I could get to the bottom of the issue was to make the student feel comfortable enough to tell the truth. Once I changed my approach I started to have more success in dealing with conflict and was able to diffuse conflict more quickly and I started to take my journaling more seriously.

Journaling became my primary source of research and since I started reflecting on topics of honesty during Exploration of Classroom Inquiry course (EDUC 510), continuing on that path as different issues arose was a seamless transition. It occurred to me much of my research was reflective and this was just as useful as current findings. Actually I found my reflections and
course of action to be valid once I began reviewing the literature surrounding the topic. This only fueled my fire and motivated me to press on.

I started recording everything I could remember a case-by-case basis throughout my teaching career and started to realize I had been making adjustments to encourage honesty all along. The only difference at this point was knowing my decisions were supported by volumes of research. As a teacher of Physical Education I have seen children in a competitive environment on a regular basis. Even if the games were less competitive by design I feel children lie, no matter what the circumstance, if they feel its necessary. Though competition may be a factor in some circumstances my feeling was that most issues arise naturally, not just in competition, but when a student a need to assert or defend themselves.

Like many teachers, I have learned from my mistakes and did what I felt best in any given situation. I have had many issues with dishonesty working in a K-5 school but as my career has progressed I feel many of the older students learned where I stand on this topic and know honesty is the best policy. My younger students became my focus and I wanted to have a better understanding of the nature of lies because I felt they especially struggle to be honest. I am not sure if this is because they do not know me as well and are not aware of how much I appreciate honesty or if it is because they are in a very self preserving, self asserting age.

I noticed many of the students I struggle with are also a part of a “Lunch Bunch” which takes place in school, during lunch periods in the school counselor’s office. I decided I would pick the school counselor’s brain a bit and see what Lunch Bunch was all about. I asked Mrs. Asip if she could tell me what the focus of the lunch time group meeting was and if she would mind my sitting in with her group. She happily obliged telling me lunch bunch was multi focused to address the many different needs of the children who attended. During their time
together they start by building a relationship with each other as peers as well as with the
councilor. They work on social skills, fostering friendships, building new friendships, setting
boundaries, and building tolerance levels. They play a variety of games, after all this is their
recess, including two truths and a lie, board games about building friendships and social skills
and “act it out,” where they are given sticky situations and they can be as dramatic as they
choose but have to come to a meaningful conclusion (H. Asip, personal communication,
February 4, 2015). After obtaining permission from our principal I joined a few different lunch
groups of varying ages, sporadically over the course of two months. There were great things
happening during lunch bunch but my big take away was two truths and a lie, which will be
discussed further in the findings.

When meeting for our second class of Inquiry in Practice (EDUC 602) I started to feel
nervous about not having concrete numbers in order to quantify my findings and support my
research. This lead me on a path to do a bunch of busy work in order to measure what cannot be
measured. Was I willing to lie to my students in order to see how my outcomes may have
changed? Not a chance. I believe in practicing what I preach and the relationships I have built
with my students was not something I was not willing to sacrifice. Instead I continued to
implement the ideas supported by previous findings and supported in the research of others.

I started with my learning environment. In the beginning of each school year I lay out
my expectations and over the years this list has become more complex. I went from dictating the
rules to laying the groundwork so they would have a working knowledge of rules and conduct.
We discuss honesty and instead of telling them they will get in trouble if they lie I approach it in
a very matter of fact way. As I stated December 4, 2014, “We all make mistakes, sometimes the
biggest mistakes lead to the biggest lessons. Part of learning from these lessons is being
accountable and accepting responsibility for our actions. If we aren’t being honest are we being accountable? Are we accepting responsibility? No, Then how can we possibly learn anything?”

Once I learned about threat conditions and their effect on children’s honesty I continued to make changes, which contributed to a student’s comfort level. There were a few different ideas such as allowing cool down time, listening to different versions or the story, avoiding placing blame but providing opportunities for the student to accept responsibility. Many of these proved successful for me so I began to use them and allowed techniques to evolve as I went along. One thing I once struggled with was giving a consequence once the student was honest and claimed responsibility. After all a consequence is a threat condition. Failing to follow through with a consequence set in place would only cause the student to question my honesty. If I say I am going to do something I have to do it. I just had to make sure the consequences were laid out and fair. This way the student could tell me what the consequence was and agree it is equitable for their actions. These consequences range from an apology to a call home or a visit to the principal’s office.

“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.” This was a quote we were asked to reflect on in 510. I highlighted it at some point as I was rereading my journal and feel this contributed to my research. Talking to students about lying is one thing but walking them through the process of being accountable, accepting responsibility and dealing with the consequences in an appropriate manner is where the real lessons were learned.

I started to pay close attention to how I encouraged students to tell the truth. I noticed my perception of lying had changed. I understood how complex lying can be and though children make mistakes its not always with mal intent. Sometimes we as adults may not perceive the
situation correctly and hold them accountable for something they are honestly not guilty of, or at least perceive themselves as not guilty. This changed my approach drastically.

After learning about the perceptions main focus was to see the situation from multiple points of view. Number one being the point of view of the child I am speaking to and number two would be presenting the point of view of the other party involved. Along with perceptions I had to be willing to apologize if I perceived something incorrectly. This is part of practicing what you preach. I have apologized many times. Each time I followed all of the same rules set for and by my students and I have obviously accepted the consequences.

One thing I am still working on is the “acceptable lie.” When students lie to one another in order to protect the other person’s feelings it is hard for me to work through it in the same way other conflicts and lies are dealt with. I never considered lying acceptable until I read Talwar and Crossman’s article from 2001, “From little white lies to filthy liars: The Evolution Of Honesty And Deception in Young Children. Advancement in Child Development and Behavior.” Talwar and Crossman brought attention to the fact that, “age directly correlates with the development and discovery of the appropriateness of lying. Children as young as three defined a statement as a lie solely based on factuality—incorrect statements made with good intentions were deemed as lies. It is not until ages 6-10 that the children start to consider the speakers beliefs when characterizing the honesty of their statements.” In my eyes these children are showing empathy and this is not deserving of consequence.

The truth is, honesty is a complex concept and something that is learned and practiced over time. In the world of education it is known children learn through modeling and imitation. Through Hays and Carver’s 2014 article, “Follow the liar: the effects of adult lies on children’s honesty. Developmental Science” lying to your child or any child can change their perception of
others as well as their behavior regarding honesty. If a child knows they are being lied to it could alter the way they value honesty. A child is more likely to adopt, or imitate, a modeled behavior if the model is similar to the observer with an admired status (Bandura, 1977), suggesting that a parent’s dishonest actions may be highly susceptible to imitation.

FINDINGS

Though I feel my findings are discussed throughout this research paper, the most validating moments were the ones that occurred early on during my literature review. Not only did the research of others help me validate my own beliefs, but it helped to mold my questions and narrow my focus when implementing ideas during classroom practice. Three main ideas emerged: threat conditions, perceptions, acceptability of lying, and later I started to consider the complexity of lying.

Threat conditions seem to be the most obvious reason why children lie. Once I learned about threat conditions and their surprising effects on children’s honesty I stopped to think about how much my classroom community fosters honesty. Most adults start off with a consequence like, “If you don’t tell the truth you will be in very big trouble!” This does not encourage honesty; it puts the child up against a wall and makes them defensive. Knowing this was true in my own findings I was still a little surprised to discover through Lepper’s research, most children are more likely to be truthful under low threat conditions. This is where my classroom community comes in.

The classroom community I strive for is one where students feel comfortable to try new things, take risks, and make mistakes. Where we are honest and kind to others and contribute to a safe learning environment. Where we laugh with each other, have fun, remind each other kindly and say sorry when we make mistakes. I use this language as much as I possibly can to
reinforce its practice. The children are able and have used it too and though they might forget they can always be reminded.

The changes I made over time regarding my approach to the child and the importance of accountability over simply coming clean are valuable and valid changes. So I continued to make changes contributing to a student’s comfort level in an effort to coax the truth out of them. First and foremost it is important to allow the student a time to cool off or calm down. As they take time to calm down it is important to plant the seed by reminding them that we all make mistakes and it’s ok as long as we learn from them. It is important to listen to their side of the story first, without interrupting and without passing judgment. Then approach the topic by using the student’s words to describe what happened and how they, they student, perceived the incident. Once we are on the same page it is important to then present another point of view. Maybe it is my point of view, or maybe it is the point of view of the other party involved, either way it should be delivered in the third person as to avoid placing blame and guide the student in the direction of telling the truth. A great way to do this might be to use Mrs. Asip’s two truths and a lie.

Mrs. Asip uses the game two truths and a lie the first time she meets with a group. She talks about the rules of their meetings, honesty and how important it is to tell the truth, especially during their time together. Then Mrs. Asip tells the students, “Today and today only you get to break one of my rules.” She continues to explain the game, which many of have played, but never in such a useful way. Each person has to come up with two things about themselves that are true and one that is a lie. Each person shares these ideas with the group and the other participants have to guess which one is the lie. In a group of older students Mrs. Asip asks students to record it on paper and they mix them all up. One by one Mrs. Asip removes the
pieces of paper and reads them to the group. The group has to decide who wrote the facts on the paper and then determine which is the lie. I love this idea and hope to use it either in the beginning of the year or when appropriate in class as previously mentioned.

Perception is what really complicates truth and lie telling. There are the perceptions of the class, the perceptions of the lie teller, teacher, and situational perception as well as perceptions of character. These are the situations that are incredibly frustrating and difficult to solve without drawing conclusions. The literary review shed light on many factors determined to cause lying in children, confirming prior personal beliefs and findings such as the role perceptions play in being honest and discovering the truth. Perception caused me to question the accuracy of my research prior to reviewing literature on the topic as well as the research of others. The acceptability of lying was something I never considered and it brought light to the complexity of lie verse truth especially in children. Most importantly I found research to support my findings, which means there are methods to help children to be more honest. Here is an example of one such situation taken from my October 31, 2014 journal entry:

“There was an incident before class where a student “Taylor” kicked another student “Bill.” I have known both students as long as they have been in school (five years). I give my students the benefit of the doubt when they tell me something and I like to think my students are honest and feel comfortable being honest with me. Taylor swore up and down (in a very matter of fact way I must add) that she didn’t do it. Bill swore up and down she did. Now my dilemma here is that I have seen Brian do and say things that weren’t nice, but he was always honest about it no matter how hard it might have been. I have not seen this behavior from Taylor other than the occasional stink eye. I had a gut feeling Tara was guilty but hesitated to go against her because she was so confident and she trusts me. Her parents have thanked me many times for being a role model and being there for her.”
This is an example of my perception of these children as it pertained to this situation. Interestingly enough I was also taking into consideration Taylor’s perception of me, and how this incident might impact our relationship proper action wasn’t taken. Keep in mind this is all occurring as the students were lined up to march in the Halloween parade. Based on my reflection I don’t think I dealt with this situation the best way possible. I think I threw my hands up and just tried to get them past it.

“I was confronted with this issue and very little time to resolve it. All the support staff (my principal and school counselor) were outside already waiting for the rest of the students to exit the building. I looked at Bill in Taylor’s presence and said, “Look Bill I don’t know why you would just make something like this up for no reason so I do believe that something happened. The truth is if we deal with this now you are both going to end up in the principal’s office and will miss the parade.”

Knowing what I know now I would have dealt with this differently and feel I might have been able to get to the bottom of it. I would also like to say that I would have held them accountable and had them miss the parade but that is a separate issue. I thought it was interesting that this issue bothered me so much that I was discussing it with my family on Thanksgiving and my brother had some interesting insight. My brother is a karate instructor in the neighboring town and we have a few common students. Taylor’s little brother was one of them. In this discussion my brother presented another perspective I never could have imagined.

“He started telling me about how many behavioral issues Taylor has at home. He said that Taylor’s mother was struggling with Taylor’s Anger and violence toward her brother. He continued to share a story about how the toilet paper dispenser at the karate school had been ripped out of the wall more than a handful of times. After much investigation and questioning they finally ended up just telling Taylor they knew she was guilty because they put cameras in the bathroom (which was a
lie in itself) and saw her do it. Tara came clean to ripping the toilet paper dispenser out of the wall upward of eight times. I HAD NO IDEA! I was shocked. With this new information I knew I had to apologize to Bill and let him know that I believed him and that I appreciate all his honesty over the years.”

My perception of Bill was accurate. My perception of Taylor could not have been more wrong and though I apologized to Bill I never did reach out to Tara. I was kind of trying to digest this new and frightening information. I realized that maybe her perception of me was not as important has I had originally thought. I will have the conversation with her one-day, but I learned two important lessons: 1.) Never let your emotions or perceptions get in the way of finding the truth, and 2.) Focus on the facts and guide them toward telling the truth. Had I followed these rules I feel I could have gotten her to tell the truth. Let is explore how I arrived at my second lesson.

Learning from the Bill and Taylor incident I thought about how I could find the truth amidst all perceptions and feelings involved. One of the most frustrating parts of my situation was when students would lie about nothing and for no particular reason. One example is of a student who we will call “Minnie” who would lie consistently about nothing at all. She would share stories about family members that did not exist, doing things they never did. Every time she had to go to the bathroom it was an “emergency” or she didn’t know where it was so someone had to go with her. She would act out by blatantly doing something to test her boundaries or because she thought I wasn’t watching. When confronted with it she would then deny it up and down until the cows came home. Sound familiar? Minnie was quite manipulative for a kindergartener. Maybe its because she is painfully adorable, everyone tells her how cute she is, and she probably gets away with murder at home with two older brothers who probably get blamed for everything. But she just loves attention and will do anything to get it.
This brings me to the moment I realized all I had to do was focus on the facts and present them in a way that makes the lie teller comfortable admitting to their mistake. If I can just get them to admit their mistake they get to experience coming clean, being accountable, and therefore learn from their mistake and realize owning up to your mistakes isn’t so bad after all.

“Minnie was unprepared (was not wearing sneakers) again. Of course all of a sudden there was a group of girls who didn’t think they were wearing the proper shoes (they were), or they didn’t feel good and wanted to sit out. I knew they were all fighting for a chance to sit on the stage with Minnie and color. You see Kindergarteners do activity-related coloring sheets or letter tracing activities so they are participating in some way though they can’t actively participate.”

I was able to get the class going before setting Minnie up with some supplies. Looking back on it I think she was frustrated with me because no matter how hard they tried I wouldn’t let anyone sit out with her.

“At the end of class I walked over to the stage where Minnie was sitting to make sure she cleaned up after herself. When I walked over I saw that she has rolled the twistables (hybrid between a crayon and a colored pencil) all the way up and broke them off at the base. I was so mad! I just picked up the small pieces and asked, “What is this?” She replied, “I didn’t do that.” I tried asking her what happened and got nothing, she just sat there and shrugged. I knew the facts, the twistable pieces weren’t there before and now they were and she was the only one using them. Nothing.”

Three days later, when Minnie had PE again, she was unprepared, again. I told her to have a seat on the stage and I started class. She was raising her hand on the stage and I ignored her. I was dealing with the 18 other prepared students in the class.

“She started to get off the stage and walk over to me and I told her she needed to go back up there and wait until I was done with the warm up. She followed up
with, “I wanna cul-lah (color).” Well this infuriated me but I managed to keep it together. Unfazed I looked at her and said, “Go back to the stage, sit down, and wait for me to come talk to you.” Once I got the class going I was able to go and talk to her and explain that she couldn’t “cul-lah” because someone broke all the Twistables and now no one can color.

I approached it by playing dumb, to take some of the pressure off in hopes of getting her to tell me some version of the truth. I started off with a story about how I cleaned off the stage the day before our last class and knew nothing was left behind. Then I talked about the fifth grade class being the first class in there that day and they didn’t use the twistables. “Hmmmmm, you think maybe you rolled them too high and accidentally broke them off when you were trying to color with them?” She shook head yes. “So you did break them,” I said. She shook her head yes.”

In my opinion this is growth. She was able to admit to breaking them and that is all I care about. I still didn’t give her anything to color with because I wanted her to know I meant what I said and that her behaviors had a fair consequence. Interestingly enough she hasn’t been unprepared since. Because of her behavior I don’t trust her. This is a sad and consistent struggle, but I don’t treat her any differently. I can’t. All I can do is hold her to the same standard as everyone else. I don’t give her an inch outside the boundaries I set for everyone else and now our relationship is stronger. She still tries little things here and there but not nearly like she used to. She does however have my co teacher wrapped around her finger so now I am working with him to hold her to the same standards.

With each discovery the complexity of honesty was becoming more and more evident. I thought it was important to do some research on these findings as well. As previously mentioned in the words of Talwar and Crossman, “It is true that age directly correlates with the development and discovery of the appropriateness of lying. Children as young as three defined a statement as a lie solely based on factuality-incorrect statements made with good intentions were
deemed as lies. It is not until ages 6-10 that the children start to consider the speakers beliefs when characterizing the honesty of their statements.” Children as young as three can define a lie by finding it factuality-incorrect, this means that children do know the difference between truth and lie. Which raised the next question, do they know better? This article made me think differently about the complexity of lying. According to my research and the research of others it is difficult for children to learn the difference between antisocial (self-preserving) and prosocial (told for the benefit of another) lies. This has more to do with a child’s cognitive ability and not the ability to know the difference between right and wrong. So the answer is yes they do know better, but they might not understand why until their cognition has grown.

There were times during my research where I felt pulled in many different directions. I know there is more information out there that will help me to be a better decoder of the truth and I am slowly but surely answering the emerging questions related to this study. I do know that I am a better decoder of the truth now than I was at the beginning of this mission. I also realize that I might not have all the answers and that is ok. I do have a few tools that I can use to encourage children to be honest in a case by case basis. My mission to foster a more honest future remains to be determined but with the patience and perseverance of educators and parents I am hopeful.

IMPLICATIONS

My findings lead me in many different directions, encouraged me to look at each conflict separately and more carefully than ever before while. I need to make sure I take all of these factors such as perception, threat conditions, complexity and acceptability of lying so I can build the confidence of my students and they can feel good about making the right decisions and accepting responsibility for their actions.
I feel I have a better understanding of why children lie. There are more reasons than I ever imagined. I have developed strategies to coax the truth out of a child who is afraid of consequence, or the unknown. I feel confident in the way I handle situations where a child can’t accurately recall events, and I even for the child who falsely admits to wrong doing.

Age does have an impact on honesty but again for more reasons than I would have ever imagined. The level of a child’s cognition has a major impact on their ability to process situations of conflict. Lying and honesty can be learned so home life and exposure to transgression would surely have a great impact on how a child views and values honesty.

LIMITATIONS:

Initially I was hoping to have quantitative evidence to measure the occurrence of dishonesty in my class and to support my methods used to foster honesty. Especially after meeting in class and hearing percentages and other quantitative data I was nervous I was missing something. I tried to measure the growth in honesty of my students. Unfortunately I had limited time with students, a large number of students, as well as a high occurrence level of dishonesty.

There were many times I sat down and tried to understand the notes I took and to calculate the numerical data I was gathering. My conclusion was to focus on the individual case and work to foster honesty in those situations with a qualitative approach to see what the end result would be instead of also taking on the quantitative procedures, which are difficult to measure. These many attempts failed and lead to busy work that never amounted to anything. The truth is that many cases were difficult to decode and I wanted to make sure I was spending my time tackling what was really important in my research. You can’t measure how much you nature, or coax someone into being honest.
The important part was to take all of the things I learned and get them out into the world to start making a difference. I know I can’t change the world, but I know I can try and the more students I come in contact with the more of a chance I have in making a difference.

EMERGING QUESTIONS:

There were many questions that came up throughout my research. Some I was able to find answers to and others took me on a wild goose chase, which are the ones that remain as my emerging questions. How accurate are these studies since it is nearly impossible to remove perception? Do children falsely admit to wrong doing solely because their lack of cognition? Is it also because they look to avoid transgression? I am curious if these cases become fewer as children grow older.

This brings me to another question. Do we grow into or out of honesty? It seems as a child’s cognition grows they have a better understanding of honesty and what it is to lie. However the complexity of lying also increase with cognition. So who can be relied on to be honest? Can we trust children, adolescents, or adults more or less?

Do children lie more in the presence of other children, if so why? Is it due to the lack of boundaries? Do children value other children’s perceptions less? Do some children rely on the fact that another child might not be able to cognitively process transgression and therefore they feel there is less of a chance they will be held accountable. Do they lie just because the environment allows them to do so?

There are so many questions that I don’t know that I will ever find answers to. Human beings are complex and as we evolve we only become more complex, as does the world we live in. All I know is that if we all make an effort to be more honest it will catch on. Research
supports modeling and imitation in learning. If we practice what we preach the is more of a change for the world to be a better place.

CONCLUSION:

My lit review was incredibly valuable to my research. Not only did it validate the methods I was using at the time the study began, it aided in the development of new methods. It was hard to choose one article to discuss so instead I gathered the three main topics that emerged throughout. Threat Conditions, Perceptions, and the Acceptibility & Complexity of Lying changed my understanding of honesty. These topics were such a large part of my research, action plan, and therefore contributed to my findings.

Understanding that threat conditions, like telling a child, “You will be in big trouble if you’re not honest” are less affective than the following methods:

1. Setting clear and consistent boundaries.
2. Fostering the ability to have open discussions about honesty, lies, and making mistakes
3. Creating fair and well-known consequences to be discussed openly.
4. Building a successful Learning community: where students feel comfortable to try new things, take risks, and make mistakes.

My learning community is one where we remind each other to be honest and kind to others. Contribute to a safe learning environment. Where we laugh with each other, have fun, remind each other kindly and say sorry when we make mistakes. This is one of the things that I take pride in and contributes greatly to student’s honesty.

If children are able to take ownership of their actions whether good or bad they can only learn and grow from there. The conversation stops when a student isn’t able to or refuses to take responsibility. There is not chance for learning or growth to take place. We need to encourage
students to consider the facts, another perspective, stick up for themselves, and at least get the conversation started.

**IMPLEMENTATION PLAN:**

I will continue to use what I have learned in this study to encourage my students to be honest. By encouraging honesty and building student’s confidence in accepting responsibility for their actions only good things can happen. Good things for them as individuals and good things for their future and the world we live in. Their friendships and relationships will be stronger, and they will better exhibit 21st Century skills such as problem solving, communication skills, leadership, ethics, accountability, adaptability, personal productivity, personal and social responsibility, people skills, and guide themselves in the right direction throughout life.
References


