Deceiving Students for Altruistic Reasons - A Moral Examination

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Introduction

A student comes to you after class and tells you: "I'm really bad at X and I won't get a good grade on the exam." As an experienced teacher, you believe the student is probably right, since you assess her chances of performing better as small. However, you may also think that being untruthful in this situation is the right conduct. Perhaps you think that because you believe it will raise her self-confidence, or because it will improve her achievements, or because she needs to hear some encouragement. But, to be untruthful might conceal important self-knowledge from her, jeopardize her autonomy and harm your credibility. Well, should you "act as if" you expect her to get a good grade? Should you deceive her?

My main motivation in this paper is to draw attention to the phenomenon of deceiving students for altruistic reasons. The first part establishes that such deceptions do occur through an analysis of such a practice – that of implementing the Pygmalion effect (the idea that teacher expectations of students serve as self-fulfilling prophecies). However, the further aim, which is discussed in the second part of the paper, is to offer an answer to the question when are teachers justified in deceiving students for altruistic reasons?

The over simplified answer is that deception is permissible if it's a 'white lie' – if its aim is to benefit the deceived. However, not all 'white lies' are justified just because they benefit the deceived. For example, an employee might conceal the truth about a bad deal from his employer 'for her own good'. But, even if the boss would be 'better' not to know the truth, she still has a strong claim against this kind of deception. An altruistic teacher deception might be justified, but this is not a simple matter and needs some thought, similar maybe to the ongoing debate in medical ethics regarding Placebo treatment. A possible reason for the lack of such debate is the tendency of policy makers and educational institutions not to treat students as persons. I will discuss this later in the paper, but probably from middle school level and above, students are old enough to be considered as deserving the truth as much as adults. For now, we can keep the discussion to this age group.
Implementing the Pygmalion effect Necessarily Involves Deception

Perhaps the most prominent example of altruistic deceptions in education is the 'Pygmalion effect', by now a famous and commonly held concept. In 1966 Robert Rosenthal, a Harvard University researcher and Lenore Jacobson, the principal of an elementary school, conducted a piece of research that tested whether differences in teacher expectations led to differences in students’ performance.¹ In their research, children from first to sixth grade were tested for IQ, and teachers were manipulated to believe the test examines the children's ability to achieve intellectual gain. The teachers were told that some children are expected to be "growth spurters", that is - are expected to show an ‘unusual intellectual gain' in the next year, while in truth those children were chosen at random.² Eight months after the initial IQ test the children were retested, and according to the researchers the children labeled as “growth spurters” ‘showed a significantly greater gain in IQ score than did the control children’.³ The researchers thought it provided:

“...further evidence that one person's expectations of another's behavior may come to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy. When teachers expected that certain children would show greater intellectual development, those children did show greater intellectual development.”⁴

The researchers’ book about the subject, named ‘Pygmalion in the Classroom’ initiated great interest in the phenomenon and much criticism. But, if Rosenthal's and Jacobson's conclusion is valid,⁵ it appears reasonable to infer from it that teachers should present high expectations to their students in order to improve the students' performance, regardless of the teachers' real expectations. However, there are some important differences between research and practice in this case.

When teachers are manipulated into thinking that some of their students are “growth spurters”, then those teachers communicate what they have good reasons to believe is true.⁶ However, a different process is taking place when an agent knowingly manipulates his expectations in order to improve the performance of the other actor. In the case of the research above – those can be only the researchers themselves, since they are the ones who knowingly deceive others. The researchers deceived the teachers, who themselves were not knowingly deceiving the students.

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² Ibid, p. 115.
⁵ The results of the research have seen many criticisms and generated many discussions and follow ups, questioning the validity of the methodology and conclusions of the research, the real size of the effect and its implications for education and more. For a meta-analysis of Pygmalion Effect and Self-fulfilling prophecies in education see Lee Jussim and Kent D. Harber, “Teacher Expectations and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies: Knowns and Unknowns, Resolved and Unresolved Controversies.” Personality and Social Psychology Review 9, no. 2 (May 1, 2005): 131–155.
⁶ A general formulation of self-fulfilling prophecies can be found in Michael Biggs "Self-fulfilling Prophecies", The Oxford Handbook of Analytic Sociology, ed. Peter Bearman and Peter Hedstrom, Oxford University Press, 2009, Cha. 13.
This complexity is overlooked when teachers are encouraged to deceive students. Here are recent recommendations to use something like the Pygmalion effect, which I believe capture a commonly held view in schools today:

"Even if a teacher does not truly feel that a particular student is capable of greater achievement or significantly improved behavior, **that teacher can at least act as if he holds such heightened positive expectations.** Who knows, the teacher very well may be convincing to the student and, later, to himself."

"It can be difficult to deliberately change our expectations of others. But we can consciously change our behavior. **By adopting the set of behaviors above, we'll be acting like our kids, our students or our employees have great potential — potential that they'll more than likely live up to.**  
(Emphasis in the quotes is my own)

The recommendation to ‘act as if’ a certain student is capable of greater achievements or significantly improved performance is probably made out of a concern for the student. However, it gives little thought to the fact that it involves deceiving her. Even if we excuse scientists for manipulating research subjects with the aim of discovering the truth, it is an open question whether we should be supportive of the use of deception in the common classroom.

In what follows I wish to question the morality of deceptive practices in education, using Pygmalion effect as an interesting example of these.

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7 It should be noted what Pygmalion effect is not, and mostly, it should not describe a process in which the teacher believes the student can really perform p+, but something holds her back. For example, if the teacher estimates that the reason for the gap between the student performance and her high expectations from the student is due to the self-image of the student. In such a case, if the teacher acts as if the student can perform p+, he’s not deceiving, since he believes the student can perform p+, knows why she doesn’t, and acts in a way that is meant to narrow the gap – she helps improve the student’s self-image. In this case there is no deception going on, and the process cannot be described as implementing of Pygmalion effect.

9 Annie M. Paul, “How To Use the “Pygmalion” Effect”, Time, 1 Apr. 2013, Retrieved from: http://ideas.time.com/2013/04/01/how-to-use-the-pygmalion-effect/
2 – Teachers' Commitments of Goodwill and Truthfulness

To begin a moral examination of employing the Pygmalion effect\(^\text{11}\) and other teachers' altruistic deceptions, I assume that there are (at least) two morally significant aspects of the attitudes and behaviors of teachers towards students. These aspects are truthfulness\(^\text{12}\) and goodwill, and they are part of what is regarded as teacher trustworthiness.\(^\text{13}\) Truthfulness I understand roughly as 'what information A communicates to B is what A has good reasons to believe is true'. Goodwill I understand roughly as 'what A does is what A has good reasons to believe is good for B'.\(^\text{14}\) If I think what is good for you is to deceive you, these two aspects conflict. In such cases, what should teachers do? This dilemma is characteristic of asymmetrical relationships, and sometimes referred to as 'paternalistic lies'.\(^\text{15}\)

For example, a teacher may communicate false high expectations to her student out of goodwill if she believes that will make the student better off, is keeping the student's best interests at heart, etc. However, doing that is also being untruthful. To better understand what the right conduct is for teachers we need to examine in what sense these two aspects are pivotal in education.

2.1 Truthfulness and goodwill as means in education

One possible explanation of the importance of truthfulness and goodwill in education is to view them as means to reach desired educational goals. This implies education has some aims, and the teacher should act out of truthfulness and goodwill in order to achieve the ends of the practice. However, unlike the case of placebo in medicine,\(^\text{16}\) in which most would agree the main goal of the physician-patient relationship is the health of the patient, in education there

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\(^{11}\) It seems there are good reasons to reject a policy of implementing the Pygmalion effect on empirical grounds, since further research shows it doesn't have the degree of desired effects that Rosenthal and Jacobson thought it has (see note 5). Also, there are good epistemic reasons to reject such a policy, since implementing it might hide or block important information about the real situation not only from students but from teachers and policy makers as well. However, due to limitations of space I will not touch upon the empirical and epistemic reasons to reject the use of the Pygmalion effect.


\(^{14}\) On both aspects see Cooper, p. 85. On Trust as Goodwill see Baier, p. 259; Strudler, p.141. The concept of trust doesn't have to be understood as containing these two aspects, or might even be understood as two different concepts. This is not very important for my argument - if one doesn't agree with this analysis of trust, she may still consider both truthfulness and goodwill to be central commitments in educational relations. What interests me most in this paper is that though both truthfulness and goodwill are pivotal in education, they are sometimes in conflict.


are diverse theories regarding the aims of the practice. Just to name a few out of the contents of a collection of essays on the issue, these include: Citizenship, Autonomy, Critical Thinking, Self-Determination, Well-Being, National Identity, Fairness and more.\textsuperscript{17} Disagreements and conflicting views about the aims of education are problematic for our purposes because different aims will give us a different account of how the teacher should balance truthfulness and goodwill – and so cannot help us much in deciding whether to deceive or not. If the physician can justify her untruthfulness in using a placebo by appeal to her goodwill towards the patient, the lack of general agreement in regard to the ultimate goal of education and the means required to reach this goal makes this kind of justification a harder task for educators.\textsuperscript{18}

On top of that, Dewey among others, claims that education should not be thought of as a process with rigid objectives: "...education is itself a process of discovering what values are worthwhile and are to be pursued as objectives... There is no such thing as a fixed and final set of objectives, even for the time being or temporarily. Each day of teaching ought to enable a teacher to revise and better in some respect the objectives aimed at in previous work."\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, taking fixed objectives too 'seriously' seems to be what is behind the recommendation to deceive students for their own good.

A certain thinker or community might contend that truthfulness may be jeopardized in order to promote what that community believes is an important aim of education. For example, in order to promote civil unity, Plato famously proposes deceiving all future citizens of the republic about their origins.\textsuperscript{20} Or, to take another aim of education, it seems those who recommend to employ the Pygmalion effect as a policy for teachers assume academic achievements are the ultimate goal of education, and this goal justifies using deceptive means. However, if we think there is something wrong about deception, for an educational aim to justify the use of deception: 1) we need a formulation or explanation of what are the aims of the practice, 2) an argument to show these should be the ultimate or central goals of education, and 3) an argument to show that the benefits of reaching these goals justifies the harms of using deceptive means. A hard task indeed. Moreover, even if these conditions are fulfilled, it would legitimize deception only for those who agree with these specific aims of education.

As there is no clear consensus about the ultimate aim or aims of education, and it is questionable if education has and should be thought of as having 'fixed and final set of


\textsuperscript{18} Another possibility is offered by Pádraig who claims that we should think of education as a practice in its own right and so having inherent purposes. Specifically, he derives the virtues of teachers and learners from the conversational nature of the educational practice itself. I sympathize with much of Hogan's argument. However, the 'conversation' metaphor is elusive; there are many different types of conversations, with different purposes, participants and guiding principles. What I'm focusing on here is the unique nature of education as a conversation in which goodwill and truthfulness are paramount. Viewing education as a conversation is illuminating in some aspects, but it doesn't offer a solution to our problem - when should educators deceive students for altruistic reasons? Pádraig Hogan, 2011, "The ethical orientations of education as a practice in its own right." \textit{Ethics and Education} 6 (1):27-40.


\textsuperscript{20} Or, to promote initiation into 'the civilized inheritance of mankind' as Cooper quotes Michael Oakeshott, a teacher might use deceptive means. Thus I don't see how Cooper's argument insures truthfulness as a central teacher virtue in that tradition. Cf. Cooper, p. 86-7.
objectives', my suggestion is not to derive the value and appropriate balance of truthfulness and goodwill from the aims of the practice. There are good philosophical reasons for that, but also a practical one - we might still want to know when it would be appropriate to use altruistic deception without having to wait until the debate about the aims of education is resolved.

2.2 Truthfulness and goodwill as a necessary part of educational relations

My suggestion is to view truthfulness and goodwill as a necessary part of any intentional educational relations. That is, education is a process that takes place within a community, between members of that community, and there are valued commitments and moral expectations involved in these relations. In taking care of its young members, a member of any community is expected to behave in a truthful and benevolent way towards those under his or her care. First, there is a conceptual point here - we cannot say a person had been educated, 'but had in no way changed for the better', or, to paraphrase in relation to truthfulness, 'had in no way came closer to knowledge, understanding or the truth'. In other words, to educate, conceptually, is to keep at least some minimal degree of truthfulness and goodwill. But the worth of truthfulness and goodwill goes beyond a conceptual analysis of education.

Teachers and students are involved in relations that are hierarchical, ongoing and role derived, and thus give rise to moral expectations of teachers. These expectations are the source of the commitments of goodwill and truthfulness of educators. Community members have, and should have, good reasons to believe that educators are trustworthy, i.e. are truthful and benevolent, at least to some minimal degree. Hence, the value of truthfulness and goodwill is not derived from the outcome of the process, but from the moral expectations and claims of those involved in it.

To explain, we can think of the impartiality of a judge in similar terms. On the one hand, the impartiality of a judge might be morally valuable because it brings about a just sentence – the aim of the practice. But on the other hand, impartiality might be valued because it is what those involved in the practice expect of the judge; what they trust the judge to do. In this sense, the judge has a commitment to members of the community. In education, since the aims of the practice are undecided, possibly conflicting etc. it is reasonable to think that we should consider the importance and value of truthfulness and goodwill to lie within the commitments of educators to the educated and the community.

In other words, schooling and teaching is based on and legitimized by the commitments to truthfulness and goodwill of the teacher. Because of that, parents, management and the state entrust the students to her care and the students are willing to put their confidence in her, to learn with and from her. Hence, these two aspects of trust are not only important to good
teaching, they are what makes education possible in the first place. While we might want to maximize the teachers' degree of truthfulness and goodwill in order to achieve educational goals, we should not forget that being a teacher is already being trustworthy at least to some minimal degree. It is hard to pin down the exact threshold of these commitments. But, even a narrow formulation of these commitments can help in addressing the issue of teachers' altruistic deceptions. My suggestion is that a minimal understanding of the commitment of truthfulness is not to deceive without good cause, and of goodwill is not to intentionally harm or allow harm to happen to the students. A teacher that fails to keep these commitments not only moves away from the aims of the practice, but can be said not to be involved in educational relations at all, both conceptually and substantially.

3.3 Truthfulness and goodwill as virtues of the teacher

However, truthfulness and goodwill are more than the above minimal commitments. We have seen that in order to achieve educational goals, a higher level of these is probably required, and so teachers might wish not only to keep the minimal commitments but also to promote and maybe maximize the degree of their truthfulness and goodwill. Perhaps trustworthiness should be seen as even more than that - as a virtue of the ideal teacher or a characteristic of ideal education. As an ideal it gives teachers the incentive to promote truthfulness and goodwill to the highest degree possible. However, it is not so easy given the complexities of real educational situations.

Cooper, who follows Bernard Williams' account in 'Truth and Truthfulness', tends to think of trustworthiness as calling on the teacher to sincerely convey accurate information in regard to her subject matter. By doing so, the teacher exemplifies the virtues of truthfulness - sincerity and accuracy. Yet even if this holds true in regard to teachers' subject matter, this is only one aspect of educational relationships. In some cases, if a teacher tells the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, she will end up destroying her relationship with the student, since good relations require at least some withholding of information (which we like to call politeness or tact).

Therefore, truthfulness shouldn't be seen as an ideal we should inspire to fully implement in all elements of teacher-student relations.

In a similar fashion, if we consider goodwill to be a virtue in the ideal teacher, this might give the teacher reasons to act in an undesired way just because she believes she is doing it out of goodwill towards the student, or because the student would perceive her actions as caring. Noddings warns about understanding care as a virtue of the individual. She states that the "good intentions captured in the slogan [‘all children can learn’] can lead to highly manipulative and dictatorial methods that disregard the interests and purposes of students." I would add that sometimes deceiving out of goodwill might be an unjustified breach of the teacher's

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25 Cooper, pp. 79–87.
26 "Communicative desert calls for a fine-tuned sensitivity to situations where the bald truth would defeat the ends of practice." Shirley Pendlebury, "Accuracy, Sincerity and Capabilities in the Practice of Teaching." Studies in Philosophy and Education 27, no. 2–3 (2008), pp. 179-180. I agree on the need to be sensitive to context, but think the guide to the right conduct should not be the ‘ends of the practice’ but the preconditions of trust that underlie teaching as a practice.

commitment of truthfulness. What is meant by this can be illustrated by the scenario of the deceiving employee. Even though the manager's well-being might be harmed unless her employee deceives her, it seems she still deserves to hear the truth. Goodwill as a virtue is not supposed to override truthfulness in such occasions. Therefore, both truthfulness and goodwill are not fully desirable each by itself if we wish to promote trust relations in education. Moreover, we might not want too high a degree of teacher trustworthiness. In certain situations, for example if she judges the students to be gullible, the virtuous teacher should attempt to get her students to be less willing to place their trust in her, or in others.

What is required from teachers is a prudential balance between truthfulness and goodwill, which takes into account the specifics of the situation and the commitments they have as educators. This is a far cry from a policy of recommending teachers to always 'act as if' their students are capable of a higher performance than the teachers think they are capable of. While the ability to balance truthfulness and goodwill in each specific situation probably comes with practice and experience, a realization of these commitments can help us in assessing the morality of suggested policies which involve deceptive measures, such as employing Pygmalion effect in classrooms. As a recommended policy deceiving students about their expected performance is wrong.
3 - Children's right to the truth

It may be claimed the above argument doesn't apply to children because deception is wrong if done to adults but not so bad if done to children. Such thinking assumes the more powerful agent in the relationship, if acting out of goodwill, may put aside truthfulness. For example, a parent wishing to prevent her child from eating candy may deceive her to believe there is no more candy left. A justification of such a practice must be based on some relevant difference which makes deceiving children, but not adults, somehow permissible.

One possibility is that children are not autonomous as much as adults, and so the damage to autonomy is not relevant, or is less relevant, in paternalistic deception. Another possibility is that children are cognitively incapable of understanding the truth, or that the truth might harm them more than it would adults. One other possibility of justification of paternalistic deception is that children, due to their undeveloped cognitive skills, are less likely to uncover deception. For this reason, it will have less harm since, for example, trust in the deceiver is not damaged if the deception remains uncovered. While some of these justifications are probably in the right direction, it seems they hold for small children, but much less if we think of school aged children. Consider the candy example. If the child is three years old – it seems more plausible to deceive her that there is no candy, than it would be to deceive a ten year old. I think this is because the parent is using her strength as a grownup, both physical and cognitive, over the child. This use of force is permissible when there are few alternatives, when it will be hard for the child to understand why he is being prevented from having the candy. However, it is less permissible when the child is capable of understanding the reasons for the deprivation of candy.

Due to space limitations, I take the easy course of maintaining that my argument applies only to those children who are capable of understanding what is implied when the teacher communicates her expectations and are capable of detecting deception, and being harmed by it. I think this happens at an early age, and by the time children enter elementary school they are capable of understanding and detecting deception. It seems to me safe to assume that by the time educators think it is impermissible to apply physical force over children, it is also impermissible to deceive them without proper justification. However, if you disagree on this point, you may still find my argument applicable to older children.

28 Feinberg's notion of "the child's right to an open future" might be relevant here. He does not address deception specifically, but claims we are justified in curtailing children's present liberty in the name of their future interests. I partly agree, but wish to raise the question of whether there are some moral limitations on how we should do that, assuming 'an open future', like other aims of education, is open to various interpretations and is possibly conflicting with other aims. Paternalism towards children is, and should be, part of the liberal discourse, but the aim of promoting personal autonomy doesn't automatically justify the use of deceptive means in education. Joel Feinberg, 2007, "The child's right to an open future", Philosophy of Education: An Anthology, edited by Randall R. Curren. Blackwell Pub.
Conclusion

Teachers and students share relations that give rise to a moral expectation of teachers. Thus, teachers must at least keep some threshold of truthfulness and goodwill towards the students, to be considered as having educational relations. On a minimal understanding of these commitment, teachers shouldn't deceive without good cause and shouldn't intentionally harm or allow harms to happen to students. From this we can infer some limitations and conditions of the use of altruistic deception by teachers.

Truthfulness, even in this narrow formulation, calls for teachers not to use deception unless it is justified. Goodwill might justify deception if telling the truth will harm the student and the relationship between the teacher and the student. Thus, teachers who communicate false expectations to students in cases in which the truth will harm the student, might be justified in their actions. This depends a great deal on context and on the nature of the relationship between the teacher and the student. As a general recommendation, it provides a reason for inexperienced teachers to consult with more experienced ones on such issues, and also to construct our educational institutions in a way which supports familiarity between teachers and students (fewer students per teacher, for example).

Because teachers have a commitment not to deceive without good cause, and because implementing the Pygmalion effect necessarily involves deceiving students, doing so requires justification. I am not aware of any such justification and do not think it would be easy to produce one. Unless such justification can be established, I suggest that we avoid damaging teachers' trustworthiness by acknowledging that the lesson to draw from the Pygmalion effect research (if its conclusions are valid) is that teachers should perhaps be more critical towards their perception of the students' ability. However, we can't accept a policy that recommends deceiving students as a routine practice. Sometimes, with a particular student, some of the time, we might think it necessary or useful to deceive, but the default should be to be truthful towards them.

I believe the general problem here is of viewing students as projects and not as persons. There is much more to say on this topic, and I'm exploring it elsewhere. Here, I've offered an understanding of teachers' trustworthiness as a key ingredient in what it is to be in an educational relationship. I believe this holds in schools in general and might serve as a way to resolve other ethical concerns about education. Especially, I hope it would direct educators and philosophers of education towards an investigation of the morality of the means used in education as distinct from the aims of education.

29 See note 5 for further discussion of this point.
References: