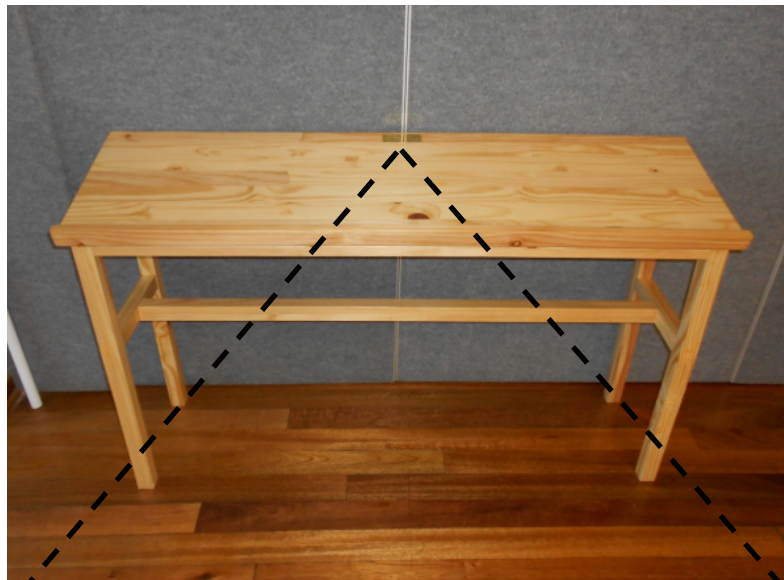


**How can the use of an honesty table help Grade 9 boys develop the courage  
to be honest?**

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*"We are living in a world where the entire concept of honesty and truth is under cultural assault." (Rosalind Wiseman, 2013)*

## **Abstract**

This action research project explored the possibility of strengthening the core value of honesty in Grade Nine boys. The table was used to generate scenarios where the boys were encouraged to act honestly, and where their honesty was tested. In addition to the use of the table, the research project incorporated a course consisting of four tutor periods where the concept of honesty was discussed, and where questionnaires were answered. This research study's aim was to investigate how the course and use of the table helped give boys the courage to be honest.

From the data that were collected it is evident that the project was a success in terms of creating awareness about honesty and giving the boys in the group the courage to be honest, something that was lacking at the beginning of the process. Acts of dishonesty were not completely eliminated, but boys who behaved in a dishonest manner became more aware of their actions and reflected on their decisions. Honesty remains a core value at St Andrew's College, and the findings show that highlighting and acting out these core values and increasing trust is essential for boys to understand the importance and nuances of this character trait.

## **Introduction**

Society has increased the demands placed on young people as their world has become increasingly competitive. This has led to an erosion of core values such as honesty. I began to notice this in the schooling context where, more and more, we find ourselves addressing issues such as increasing plagiarism, corrupt behaviour, and boys looking for excuses to justify poor behaviour. Observing this in my environment challenged me to find an intervention that would start boys thinking about their decisions and consider whether or not they were acting honestly. I felt that it was important to implement a strategy to help boys make the right decisions when nobody was policing them, and encourage them to take ownership and responsibility for poor or dishonest behaviour. This led me to develop the honesty table concept, and to formulate the research question: *How can the use of an honesty table help Grade 9 boys develop the courage to be honest?*

Using an action research approach to investigate the research question allowed me to critically analyse my intervention. As McNiff (2002) notes, "the methodology of action research allows you to evaluate what you are doing. You need to check constantly that what

you are doing really is working. Are you really influencing your situation or are you fooling yourself?”

The success of character education programmes in schools is something that is open to interpretation and there are no definite answers as to what strategies work effectively. The strength of using action research as the methodology for this project was that the majority of data collected were qualitative in the form of boys’ reflections, which gave me an understanding of what changes were being made in the boys’ psyche, and how and why this was happening. The investigative process with action research creates a spiral where an idea leads to more questioning and further investigation and this is what made it so appealing for a project of this nature.

Terms used in this study that need definition are “courage” and “honesty.” Courage in the context of this project describes moral courage where a boy does the right thing when no one is watching, and has the ability to go against popular opposition or own up to his mistakes. Honesty, for the purposes of this project, is defined as the act of doing and saying the right thing and not distorting the truth. The other term that needs to be defined is that of a group being ‘honesty positive’. This refers to a group of people comprised of more honest individuals than dishonest ones. This is an important concept in the project, as it forms the crux to the articulation of the success of the honesty table.

## **Literature Review**

In my readings I found a number of references to the poor state of honesty and truth in modern society. Such a state has been reflected in my own school by boys plagiarising and being involved in corrupt behaviour. That there has been a deterioration in these core values is supported by Rosalind Wiseman (2013), who states that:

We are living in a world where the entire concept of honesty and truth is under cultural assault. We’ve come to expect that people in leadership positions within our financial and political institutions will bend the truth. The distinction between spinning, twisting the truth, and outright lying has been blurred (p. 94).

I looked at texts that used various methods for highlighting the importance of, and raising awareness about, honesty. I read about honour codes from Woodberry Forest and Norfolk Academy and found references to the potential difficulty of implementing such a system at my school in these complex modern times. When reading about the Woodberry Forest School’s Honour Code, for example, it became apparent that this system has been embedded

for years, and, as the Headmaster, Mr Dennis M. Campbell, points out: “It would be hard to institute today, and ... we were blessed that it was deeply embedded in the Woodberry culture” (2012, p. 3).

From my reading on academic integrity, it became apparent that honour-code systems need to be supported by other structures. It was in an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, where Jennifer Dirmeyer and Alexander Cartwright (2012) noted that, “for those students fortunate enough to study at an institution with a functioning honour code: It is far easier to maintain a culture of integrity than it is to build one” (p. 1). This was encouraging as our school has the structures in place that support a culture of integrity, including weekly chapel services, tutor group sessions, a well-structured disciplinary system and a character education curriculum. Not all of these systems, however, are action-based, and the importance of this is noted in Creasy’s (2008) comment :

Character education is not simply telling children what to do, one of the many myths surrounding character education. In fact, character education encourages children to become independent thinkers who are committed to moral principles in their lives and who are likely to do the ‘right’ thing, even under challenging circumstances (p. 3).

This got me thinking about how at our school we could implement a system that requires small moral encounters to work in a way where boys are taught about honesty and integrity through constant actions of their own. According to Dirmeyer and Cartwright (2012):

With a peer-enforced honour code, the likelihood of being caught depends on other students' tolerance for cheating. Students who enter a college of mostly ‘honest’ types will more often choose not to cheat even if they are innately ‘cheater’ types, because the higher risk of getting caught makes the costs greater. That leads to a feedback loop, as more of the population behaves like ‘honest’ types than normally would, increasing the impression that everyone is honest and raising still higher the expectation of being caught. This feedback loop generates the culture of trust and integrity (p. 2).

Dirmeyer and Cartwright’s concept of the “feedback loop” was important for me to note, as the implementation of the honesty table required the majority of boys to value honesty, so that even dishonest types felt compelled to be more honest.

It is evident that courage is required to be honest, but, as noted by Andre Comte-Sponville (2003), “the fact that we once had courage does not prove that we will have it again or even that we have it now. Yet past action is a positive indication, quite literally, an encouraging sign” (p. 53). While boys may want to be courageous, Eldredge (2001) notes, “every man’s

deepest fear is to be exposed, to be found out, to be discovered as an imposter, and not really a man” (p. 45). This is one of the barriers that holds boys back and it was one of the barriers I hoped the honesty table would breakdown. By getting boys to understand that it takes a courageous man to be honest with himself and others, they would hopefully come to realise, as Eldredge (2001) says, that “the warrior is crucial in our movement toward any masculine integrity, it is hardwired into every man” (p. 141).

## **Research Context**

St Andrew’s College is a boys’ boarding school situated in Grahamstown, Eastern Cape, South Africa. Of the 490 pupils, 450 are full-time boarders. The participants in this project were the Grade Nine boys in the boarding house where I am the Housemaster. I chose them because they are at a stage in their school career where they are moving into the senior phase of their schooling and it is important to assist them in developing and refining their own values. They are going through the transformation from boy to man and I felt that the project would have the greatest impact on these boys at this stage in their lives.

Obtaining permission from the boys’ parents was done via email, and if they did not want their sons to participate they were asked to contact me. The parents were all positive about the project and gave permission for their boys to be part of the study. Responses were recorded in an anonymous journal and individual interviews were held where anonymity was guaranteed. Boys were asked if their responses could be included in a report, and they had the option of withdrawing from the project at any time.

## **The Action**

The honesty table project involved participation in a course that ran over a period of eight weeks. The sessions incorporated discussion about the concept of honesty, and boys filled out questionnaires in which personal questions were asked. The questions were designed to get the boys to think about the importance of honesty in their lives. The boys’ responses were written in a journal. The group was also taught about the ways in which they might use the honesty table.

In addition to the four one-hour lessons held during the term, ‘Hannibal’ (the name given to our honesty table) was placed in the dining hall and when the opportunity arose, dilemmas requiring the boys to be honest were posed at the table. The table was also used over the weekends, instead of a formal roll-call, to monitor attendance at meals through a self-

regulatory process of signing in. Feedback was given and discussions were held during tutor lessons. During the week, the honesty table was used simply as a symbol of honesty.

## **Data Collection**

Questionnaires were handed out to the boys every two weeks during the research. The boys' responses were written in a journal that was referenced by a number so that an anonymous record was kept of their journey through the project.

Once the data were collected and tabulated into Microsoft Excel, individual interviews were set up with three of the boys in the group. These interviews were in the form of an individual discussion about the honesty table and the course that ran during tutor periods. To help create a safer environment for interviewees, their responses were written down and not voice-recorded.

Once the interviews were completed, another focus group of three different boys was held to validate and gather other information. This group had a discussion and then wrote their ideas down on blackboards with various headings. Boys could add on to others' ideas and these responses were gathered and tabulated.

Additional information was gathered through observation and field notes made during the project. Questionnaire responses were used first to start identifying themes; interviews were used to discuss these themes; and the focus group helped identify other areas to work on and validate findings. Observation took place through the entire project and proved to be a powerful method of picking up changes in behaviour.

## **Data Analysis**

All of the data were placed into an Excel document so that links could be created. The information was carefully read and themes started to emerge from the data. Responses were then linked to a theme with a number and then sorted into similar groups so a comprehensive view of a theme could be analysed. Wordle, a digital word-cloud generator, was also used to examine word recognition in general questions. This digital tool makes words that appear more regularly look bigger than others, and was a useful visual method of highlighting important concepts in the general statements given by the respondents.

## Discussion of Results

I extracted six key themes from my data.

### *Courage and honesty*

The first theme centred around courage and honesty. During his interview, Fred commented that “the honest guys have become more honest since the introduction of the Hannibal programme.” When I delved more deeply into this it was backed up by a number of other responses in the questionnaires, such as that by Jimmy, who stated, “there is always a bit of dishonesty in us or something to hide, but I think there is less being hidden.” Basil mentioned that “before this term when I was in difficult spaces I would get butterflies in my stomach, because I know that I should be honest but I was too shy. Now during the term it has given me more confidence and it is more easy to say or to be honest.” Craig stated, “It has made it easier to be honest with friends, teachers, in general,” while John said, “I believe I have become more courageous during this term especially in honesty. I don't worry about what other people are going to do or say I just do the right thing and say the honest truth.”

From the 16 questionnaires handed out, 13 of the boys responded positively to being more courageous and to being more honest, while three boys felt that it had made no difference to them. All of the boys interviewed expressed an increased need and confidence to be honest. In group discussions, almost all of the boys who are quiet, but consider themselves honest, felt empowered to express their thoughts to the group. One of the quotes that I thought summed it up perfectly was from Fred who said, “The honest ones don't let the non-honest ones influence them.”

### *Honesty awareness*

The second theme that emerged was the enhancement of an awareness of honesty amongst the group. In one of the questionnaires, the boys were asked the question: “What type of man would you like to become in the future?” The results were combined and placed into a Wordle (Fig. 1). The word that came out as being the most frequently used was “honest.”



Figure 1: Wordle of questionnaire responses

One of the boy's responses to the question: "You have been through some tough experiences of late where your honesty has been tested. Have you thought of Hannibal the honesty table during these times?" was "Not really; I have thought of honesty as a whole because you cannot lie about things when it comes to hearings and stuff like that. The only time Hannibal featured with me was when we had to put our initial statements on Hannibal, not because it is a table but because it symbolises the whole idea of honesty."

The ideas of symbolism and awareness are linked, and boys were reminded of honesty through the awareness the table generated. Gary said, "Honesty has always been important to me but it has been on my mind more," while Harry noted that "it has reopened and refreshed me in terms of good and bad." Robert commented that "there is no doubt that it has made me think more about honesty."

#### *The group as honesty positive*

The third theme that emerged from the data regarded a change in the group's behaviour. Henry said, "The concept of Hannibal has changed the group as a whole. There is not as much lying in the group." He added that "honest acts have increased this year." Jimmy also spoke about this in his interview when he said, "Boys are owning up more, it used to be like 'shap shap' when you were asked if you had taken something that was not yours but now people are getting honest, they will admit [it]." This was backed up by Fred who stated, "there are more guys who say own up to those who didn't than before."

At one stage during my project, the boys were involved in a disciplinary incident and I observed their actions through the process. They had to write statements about what had happened. When they were asked to place these on Hannibal, it interested me that a number of them came forward to pick their statements off the table and rewrite them. When questioned about this, they said that the symbolism of the table had made them very aware of the importance of being honest.



It is evident that the programme did not change dishonest boys into honest ones overnight; however, it did make the group “honesty positive.” This ties in with the literature on creating an honest culture. As Fred observed, “eventually the other guys will become honest but it will take time.” This for me is a powerful statement because once a group starts to become “honesty positive” and an awareness is created, then the process of change within an individual can occur.

### *Thoughtful actions*

The fourth theme that emerged from the data is that boys started to think more carefully before they act. This is something I was hoping to achieve as I wanted to encourage boys to think of the consequences before they did something dishonest. From their responses it is evident that this has happened during the process of discussion around “Hannibal.” Henry said, “people think clearly before they act since the honesty table has been introduced, not so much the table but rather the discussions and concept that was discussed beforehand.” This has shown me the importance of having questionnaires and discussion about the concept of honesty. It does not have to involve hours of discussion, because as Linton indicated, it would be better to “discuss in tutor groups but not too often otherwise boys will get bored by the topic.” This highlighted the importance of introducing the table and honesty to a grade in a succinct manner. During the focus group, David described the project as something that “awakens your moral compass.” Boys will continue to make mistakes, but it is evident that they are thinking about it more. This was backed up by Bert, who noted that “even if the actions don't portray honesty there is definitely more thought about it.”

### *Honesty has a name*

The fifth theme that emerged was that of the importance of giving the table a name and thus an identity. Boys felt that by giving the table the name “Hannibal,” they knew exactly what I was talking about when I mentioned the word. Said Jimmy, “whenever I hear ‘Hannibal’ or see the table I just think of honesty.” This statement and others such as: “Giving the subject the name has made a huge difference” or “Hannibal the name is a good idea in terms of understanding the word honesty”, has shown me how boys need a word to describe physically a concept that may be abstract for them.

### *Let's talk about honesty*

The sixth theme that was extracted from the data is that there has been an increase in the thinking about and talking about honesty. Fred said that, “Okes are more confident and

comfortable to talk about honesty. It is something really important here.” Boys have thought a lot more about honesty as can be seen from the statements: “Last year I didn't even think of it. But now this year where lots of things have happened and I heard about the consciousness of lying, I have thought about it a lot,” or, as Wayne said, “It has really become more important and it's become a more important part of my life. It has taught me a lot of good paths and I have been tempted to lie but tried my best and when I was honest it helps you a lot.”

In discussions with the boys they felt that they had thought about things more deeply and that the concept of honesty was discussed a great deal more since the introduction of the honesty table. Boys were engaging with the concept in their own minds more often, as can be seen in the following statement made by Harry: “There are still individuals who are not honest. I am more aware of other boys who are not being honest.” At the same time, boys are reflecting on their own actions, as can be seen from Jimmy’s response: “If you did something during the day you would sometimes look at the table and reflect.”

## **Conclusion**

My research question examined how an honesty table might increase the courage of boys to be honest. The findings are encouraging and, from the evidence gathered, I feel that the intervention awakened boys’ thinking on honesty. Boys who are honest have shown an increase in courage to voice their opinions and act in situations where honesty has been required. It is interesting to note from the readings and results gathered that this type of intervention takes time to root in a system and, although evidence suggests that the honesty table concept has been successful, there are a number of areas that could be researched further. It is clear that character education needs to find new and active ways of imparting knowledge and we need to reflect on our practice in this area.

The project has not been running long enough to understand the implications in the long term, but if the system can create a group of individuals who are “honesty positive” then boys who enter the system will begin to change based on the group’s core values. My hope is that when boys leave St Andrew’s College and they are faced with a decision that requires moral courage, Hannibal will come to mind and they will have the courage to act honestly.

The power of giving the boys more trust and responsibility to do the right thing is an interesting topic that has emerged, and is something I would like to research in the future. The intervention of using the honesty table is being considered in other areas within the

school, but it will definitely continue in the Mullins boarding house where it has begun to take root.

## **Personal Reflection**

As a housemaster, this project has allowed me to interact with boys on a much deeper level than normal. Something I noticed when the boys were given an anonymous journal was how honest and forthcoming they were. It has made me think about other ways of allowing boys to tell someone their story, not to be marked, but merely read.

The honesty table has made me reflect on honesty myself and I have found this to be a complex issue to address with boys. When I run the programme with the new Grade Nine group I will have a much clearer idea of what questions I will ask, what examples I will use, and how to introduce the table to the boys.

Action research has been an extremely worthwhile exercise - it has made me work much more closely with qualitative data and it has been enriching not to try and find a conclusive answer, but rather gather information and let it tell the story. Getting feedback on practice has been extremely refreshing and the contacts and discussions that I have had with fellow educators has been enlightening and fulfilling.

I think the things that made me the most anxious through the process were those moments where I worried about whether I had gathered enough data, completed a big enough project or whether the intervention was making any difference to the boys at all. Talking to the boys and discussing the project put me at ease and they have been positive about the experience. After all of the work to meet deadlines and complete the project, I realise that small actions can create big change and I will be looking for other opportunities to try something new.

A huge thank you to Margot Long and Di Laycock for all of their help during the project, it is so good for one to get open and honest feedback from such experienced educators. In addition I would like to thank my group who took part in the project, I have learnt how to use Google hangout, how to use Google sites, and have realised that although we are all based in different corners of the globe we all face similar challenges.

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