Wrestling with "Will to Truth" in Early Childhood Education: Cracking Spaces for Multiplicity and Complexity Through Poetry

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This article intends to provoke ongoing conversations in the early childhood education context about "will to truth," which Glenda MacNaughton regards as the intent to know and determine the "normal" and "preferred" ways to think, act, and feel as early childhood educators. The pervading existence of will to truth amplifies concerns over fixed and determined ways to think and act as early childhood educators because "truth" and systems of power are closely linked to one another. To honour complexity and fluidity in thinking and acting as early childhood educators, the author argues for moving beyond will to truth and offers poetic practice as one possibility to reinvent habitual understandings.

Key words: truth; power; poststructuralism; poetry; practices in early childhood education

Listen to an early learning classroom, a room filled with laughter, giggles, and squabbles over toys. Watch your step in an early learning classroom, a floor where crawling kids chase light-up shoes worn by running kids. Pay attention to an early learning classroom, a space where multiple pots of aromatic plants thrive, where a puddle of spilled milk is drying. Then, feel an early learning classroom. Put yourself in this room as an early childhood educator, so that you can feel how this room is calling on you to respond—to what you hear, see, smell, and feel—carefully and thoughtfully.

Then you fall into waves of complex decision-making processes. You wonder: When children squabble should I step in and model conflict resolution skills that are suggested by that influential professional magazine for early childhood educators? You think: Or maybe I should step back and let the squabbling ones develop their own ways of handling conflicts through trial and error as my well-respected colleague often does in this classroom? You question: Shall I remind the running ones to slow to the "inside speed" to maintain a safe space for themselves and those chasing after them? You reflect: Or maybe I can turn this moment into a learning opportunity for beneficial risk-taking practice? You hesitate: Is it better to tell the child who spilled milk to clean up after themself to foster a sense of responsibility? Or is it more reasonable for me to clean it as I can do it very quickly and nap time is approaching?

Put yourself in an early learning classroom as an early childhood educator. You find yourself overwhelmed by these countless waves. The waves of decision making. These waves are followed by waves of tangled feelings—unsettlement, uncertainty, and weakness. The waves come one after another. Your energy drains as you wrestle with so many possible decisions from minute to minute. You are exhausted. So, you struggle to find a way to deal with the waves instead of being overwhelmed by them.

You think to yourself: I must find the truth about young children, which will inform me on how to make the right decision. You tell yourself: I must find the most authentic and best ways to think, act, feel and practice as an early childhood educator. You close your eyes and wonder if, in that way, you could free yourself from the labour of wrestling with waves of pedagogical decision making.

The opening is a story of me as an early childhood educator struggling to make *the* decisions—the "good," "best," and "authoritative" ones. It is an autobiographical story, but it could also be a story of many early childhood education colleagues and friends, as we have all encountered the difficulty of making decisions in an early learning classroom. We struggle to arrive at *the* decision because we want our pedagogical decisions to optimize young children's experiences of exploring and developing. This struggle is an example of how "will to truth" (MacNaughton, 2005) is entrenched in the early childhood education (ECE) context. To Glenda MacNaughton, the will to truth is about the intent to find certainty in "how to think, act and feel as normal early childhood educators" (p. 39). It is understandable that we educators have this intent to find certainties of what *should* be done, but we need to be cautious since these certainties shape (and constrain) how we think and act as early childhood educators. Thus, I hope this story serves as an invitation—to early childhood educators and those working in other disciplines—to pay close attention to will to truth. I want to invite readers to examine how will to truth is pervasive in daily ECE practices, to explore why it is necessary to move beyond it, and to experimentally wrestle with it.

This paper unfolds as follows. First, I explain the concept of truth and discuss its relationship to power from a poststructuralist perspective. Next, I build on the discussion of the relationship between truth and power to problematize will to truth within the context of early childhood education. Finally, I propose the process of creating poetry as both a tool and a condition to move beyond will to truth.

The desire to make "the" decision: How is it tied to power?

The metaphor of waves in the opening narrative describes the numerous moments of making pedagogical decisions. This metaphor illustrates the intense and challenging nature of working as an early childhood educator, and it also highlights how will to truth pervasively exists within the context of ECE.

To explain what will to truth is and why it is problematic, it is necessary to make clear what is meant by truth. The discussion about truth is premised on Michel Foucault's understanding of truth. Foucault was a French philosopher who is often associated with poststructuralism, which challenges what comes to be normalized and accepted as "natural truths" and overturns the hierarchical relationship between the "truth" and its alternatives (Benozzo, 2018). Drawing on Foucault, MacNaughton (2005) points out that the "truths" in ECE discipline are produced, and these "truths" are "culturally biased norms about how children should be" (p. 19). MacNaughton claims that "a truth is authoritative" and its authority "lies in its claim to be a statement about a phenomenon that is factual and, therefore, correct" (p. 23). That is to say, a poststructuralist educator would understand that the so-called truths about children are constructed consensus or norms rather than universal facts.

Jennifer Gore (1993, as cited by MacNaughton, 2005, p. 30) indicates that disciplinary "truths" generate authoritative norms about "what needs to be done" and "how it should be done" in the early childhood field. MacNaughton (2005) further proposes that these truths (re)produce inequity since certain knowledge of young children (i.e., ways to think, act, and feel about young children) is privileged and alternative ways are othered. For example, when I was a practicum educator, I always handled quarrels over a toy by first observing for a minute, and if the quarrel was not solved or no one came to me for help, I would step in to instruct the children about certain social skills. I might say, "Avery, you can use your words and tell Jordan 'Sorry, I am not done with using it yet. I will let you know when I am done so you can take a turn'" to instruct a "preferred" way to handle quarrels. How I acted and what language I chose to use in responding to this situation were influenced by the training I received during practicum. I treated what I learned from the training as authoritative and rarely attended to alternative approaches. Over time, this specific approach turned into my default response to children's quarrels. My view of quarrels began to be settled and fixed. I saw quarrelling as a behaviour that should always be discouraged, and I overlooked

alternative understandings of quarrelling (e.g., seeing quarrels as learning opportunities for children to develop negotiating skills or social interaction skills).

Making pedagogical decisions involves consumption and construction of truth. Our pedagogical decisions—all the choices we make about language, materials, environments, and routines—are motivated by our understandings of young children and how we should educate them. Through our pedagogical decisions, we transmit our particular understandings. Over time, as MacNaughton (2005) has pointed out, certain understandings or knowledge become "settled so firmly into the fabric of early childhood studies" that their familiarity generates the norms in the discipline of ECE (p. 1). When any particular pedagogical knowledge is established as a norm (i.e., produced as a truth), it assumes power and determines what pedagogical decisions are "correct." In other words, this "truth" governs what should be said or done. In turn, pedagogical decisions that are motivated by a particular "truth" endorse the authenticity given to the truth, and thus the power effects of truth are reinforced. This complex connection between pedagogical decisions, produced truth, and power is what Foucault (1980) meant when he described truth as "linked in circular relations with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it" (p. 133).

How will to truth affects ECE: Problematizing will to truth

The will to truth affects how educators' practice because it generates the production of truth in ECE. "Truth" in ECE governs what educators should say and do and limits ways to think, feel, act, and practice (MacNaughton, 2005). Without intentionally questioning the authority in what is normalized as truths, the dominant ways to think and act in the ECE context continue to govern our thoughts and acts and lead to constrained responses that can lack fluidity. For instance, Cooke, Wong, and Press (2019) found that the current conceptualization of beneficial risk in ECE mainly focuses on children's experiences of outdoor physical play. Cooke et al. (2019) argue that these predominant views of risk narrow educators' understanding of risk and constrain their pedagogical decisions. For example, educators may overlook emotional and cognitive risk taking which would benefit children's "holistic learning and development" (p. 9).

As the will to truth governs how we think and act, complexity and diversity are then dishonoured. Complexity— the complexity in children's acts and thoughts, the complexity in the ways to understand and feel about young children, and the complexity in our pedagogical decisions—is ignored. Encouraged by Carl Leggo, a Canadian scholar who influences and inspires scholarship of arts-based inquiry, I regard the "tangled complexity" (2014, p. 99) in human beings' experiences as something beautiful that should be recognized and honoured. I believe that complexity enriches our dialogues and experiences, and the uncertainties that come along with complexity motivate us to question and create. When our thoughts and actions are limited to norms, where shall the beauty of complexity exist and flow?

The will to truth also reinforces the right/wrong binary to consume and construct meanings in ECE. The will to truth—the intent to determine what is true or not—is embedded in binary oppositions (e.g., true/false, good/bad, desired/undesirable). These binaries derive more distinctions in the understandings of ECE, such as included/ excluded and empowered/disempowered (Kocher & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2011). Kocher and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2011) indicate that binaries are "packed with certainties, applicable knowledge and regulated spaces" and empower certain groups of people as the holders of knowledge (p. 49). As one binary opposition is more valued, the opposing binary is then "othered" and silenced (Kocher & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2011; MacNaughton, 2005). Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2013) suggest thinking in a both/and way, rather than either/or, to disrupt the hierarchical relationship between the privileged binary and the disadvantaged binary.

Wrestling with will to truth: Employing poetry as a tool and a condition

What does it mean to move beyond the will to truth? To MacNaughton, moving beyond the will to truth is a deliberate practice for liberation to "create new and multiple meanings" in the ECE community (p. 199). She proposes several approaches to move beyond the will to truth, all of which are built on the idea of revealing the politics of the truths and unsettling their normalized meanings.

Drawing on MacNaughton, I offer my own suggestions for moving beyond the will to truth by (1) intentionally disrupting the certainties of what is "best" or "true"; (2) refusing to unquestioningly adopt normalized pedagogical thoughts and actions as "what should be done and needs to be done"; and (3) attentively exploring both the dominant and alternative understandings of young children instead of seeing them in an either/or way.

I aim to challenge the authority that is given to widely held "truths," and I regard the claim of truth as problematic. Yet, my argument for moving beyond the will to truth is about *wrestling* with will to truth rather than *competing* with it. To me, wrestling differs from competing in that wrestling involves moves in various directions instead of in the opposite direction only. The idea of wrestling emphasizes that our relationship with truth is not limited to either *moving toward* it or *escaping from* the systems of power that are associated with a truth. We may also move *close* to the constructed truths to carefully examine how they become norms over time and how they affect how we think and act. We can move *away* from truths by refusing to naturalize the existing hierarchical relationship between the constructed truth and its alternatives. We can also move *around* the constructed truths by means of attentively exploring alternative ways to think, act, feel, and practice as early childhood educators.

Because wrestling with the will to truth does not argue for a move solely in opposition to the constructed truths, the idea of moving beyond the will to truth does NOT aim to encourage educators to radically disapprove of what are (or have been) widely held as truths. Rather, the suggestion to wrestle with the will to truth encourages various interactions with constructed truths, continuously and experimentally. Through a combination of various moves, a space is created where alternative, unexpected, and multiple ways to understand ECE continuously emerge. The aim in highlighting wrestling instead of competing with the will to truth is to avoid creating new uneven power relations in the process of normalizing opposite voices against "truth."

I chose to experiment with poetry because I am intrigued by the unlimited meanings packed into the succinct, yet thoughtfully selected, words that poetry invites. I use poetry as a tool and a condition to crack spaces for multiplicity and to disrupt singular truths. My purpose in sharing this experiment of moving beyond the will to truth with poetry is to illustrate *one* approach. I have no intention to claim poetry as the best approach, and I understand there are various ways and/or processes to move beyond the will to truth.

Before presenting my example of using poetry to move beyond the will to truth, I want to give some background about how I created this poem. The poem is made up of two monologues representing two imagined narrators. These monologues are inspired by conversations that arose from observing parents helping their young child to put on a jacket and the child was fully capable of doing this alone. Some colleagues shared their concerns over this scenario because they saw it as parents actively discouraging young children from becoming independent. I have conflicting thoughts and feelings toward this concern. On one hand, I understand my colleagues' view of independence because it is one of the characteristics my family values. On the other hand, as an Asian growing up in a cultural context where parents helping young children is not uncommon, I understand that this scenario could also be interpreted as a message of care and love. For years I struggled to decide *what should be done* in responding to this scenario, and I gave myself a vague answer: "It depends on the context." But I was still dissatisfied with this either/or answer, as I felt trapped by the complexity embedded in complicated contexts. Through the process of

creating this braided poem, surprisingly, I was able to appreciate the complexity in the different understandings. This braided poem captures the parallels, overlaps, differences, and conflicts between the two perspectives, all at once. Thus, this poem offers me an opportunity to think with these understandings in a both/and way.

The braided poem

Look at that little boy

                                       Look at that little boy

His mom is helping him to put the jacket on

            His mom is helping him to put the jacket on

That's an action of expressing love

           That's an action of discouraging independence

They remind me of my dad,

              They remind me of my dad

The type of dad who does not talk much, but

          The type of dad who fully believes in children's competencies
The signs of love are transmitted in the silence, and actions

         The signs of love are delivered through his words, and actions

When I was younger

             When I was younger

I had wished that he would

            I had wished that he could

Explicitly say "I love you" to me

          Help me to zip my jacket that always gets stuck

But he rarely did,

              But he rarely did,

Just like many of my friends' dads

           Just like many of my friends' dads

I think he is just shy to express emotions through words
      I think he just wants me to become an independent person
And that's still, one of many ways, and *his* way, to be a good dad
    And that's still, one of many ways, and *his* way, to be a good dad

The blanket he put on me when I fell asleep on the couch, is just like
   The pat on my back when I solve the problem all by myself, is just like
The jacket that the little boy's mom put on him
   The jacket that the little boy's mom put on him

They are all saying, "I love you", a million times
They are all saying, "I love you", a million times

Braiding two narrators' stories invites us to understand their different perspectives in a both/and way, rather than either/or. Although I visually merged these two stories by degrees, I do not aim to build a consensus on how this scenario *should* be understood. Instead, I want to foreground the complexity in our understandings.

Ruminating on this article

I raised the question at the beginning of this article, does knowing the truth in ECE free us from the labour of wrestling with waves of pedagogical decision making? My answer is NO! The intent to know the truths of early years pedagogy only leads us to endless struggles with the power effects that are generated from truths. One might

ask, "Then what should we do with these waves?" I would say to live *with* them. We can embrace the complexities that are inherent in pedagogical decisions and creatively discover the potential learning opportunities hidden within them. As we live *with* the waves, we keep the conversations, questions, and experiments flowing.

As one who has been searching to know and determine what is "right" and "good" and who is still wrestling with truths, I recognize the difficulty in reinventing our habitual understandings. Nevertheless, like MacNaughton (2005), I believe that by continuously working to move beyond the will to truth, we can free ourselves from "asymmetrical relations of power and their effects within specific regimes of truth" (p. 44). By wrestling with our will to truth, we can reestablish our relationship with the "truths" in ECE.

The process of wrestling with the will to truth is challenging, but it can also lead us to serendipitous encounters that may enrich and expand our understandings of ECE. For example, while writing this poem, I consistently moved back and forth between two imagined narrators based on my background and previous experiences. This experience enabled me to understand this scenario more holistically because I can see how the two perspectives are connected (both/and) rather than separated (either/or).

By inviting experimentations to wrestle with the will to truth, we can create a space where stories about ECE are not constrained by normalized truths. By embracing complexity, we provoke conversations that are "ongoing, always in process, and never definitive" (Leggo, 2019, p. 9). And these continuous and fluid conversations can crack stabilized ways of thinking and acting and enable us to live *with* the waves—the waves of pedagogical decision making that are part of the intense and challenging nature of working as an early childhood educator.

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