

Diffractional Ethnography in Environmental Education Research

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Diffractional ethnography as a methodology was introduced by Guillion (2018) to mediate the issues associated with traditional ethnography namely “the missing voice in that discourse – the silence of matter” (p. 1). In this paper presentation, I describe this emergent methodology as a way to reimagine education research through the context of my PhD study which explores early school years teachers' perceptions of nature and how this informs their pedagogy. Diffractional ethnography is applied to this study as a relevant and useful approach given current urgent and unpredictable times particularly with respect to catastrophic, climatic changes that are impacting the social, economic and environmental fabric of our society at an unprecedented rate.

Conceptually, a diffractional ethnography enables research that considers the materiality and relationality of matter in a move away from the humanistic focus of traditional ethnography. It seeks to achieve this by reconceptualising conventional ethnographic methods through the posthumanist lens. For example, in this paper, the author describes how methods such as lesson observations are reimaged as lesson participations that consider the human participants relationally with the materiality of the classroom and other learning spaces; along with the nonrepresentational aspects such as the social, cultural and other material-discursive forces (see Barad, 2007 for an elaboration on the idea of material-discursive forces).

Diffractional ethnography shifts thinking away from traditional ethnographic inquiry “describing people and the things they do” to asking questions about the nature of relationships between human and other matter and the entanglements that these relationships form. It seeks to look at “how boundaries are configured and reconfigured” (Guillion, 2018, p. 121) through the intra-actions that take place in a classroom setting and beyond. What sets diffractional ethnography apart from its foundations in traditional ethnography is that it does not focus on solely studying and analysing people, cultures or groups, but expands the way this data is understood through adopting a diffractional analysis rather than commonly applied qualitative forms of analysis that rely on themes and coding. This paper puts diffractional ethnography to work through demonstrating how it has been applied to my PhD study including insights from the preliminary findings which illustrate this methodology in the Environmental Education Research context.

The challenge in enacting a diffractional ethnography lies in the reconceptualisation of traditional ethnographic practices. It pushes researchers to consider the entanglements of materiality and relationality of matter and to seek the dynamic mo(ve)ments of becoming that make themselves known with/in the data. It seeks to explore “how things come to matter in the ways they do” (Davies et al., 2013). The methodology explores the flows and patterns of diffraction rather than conventional cause and effect models (Davies et al., 2013; Guillion, 2018; Mitchell, 2017; Ulmer, 2017). This can create tension for researchers who hold sacred traditional ways of doing research however, and at the same time, opens up ways to reimagine education research possibilities for a future that desperately needs it.