

Diffractional Companions: Rethinking dominant ways of knowing with Bush Kinder

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Author's Note

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Abstract

This article explores small-situated knowledge drawn from the pedagogical narrations generated with/in/through post qualitative inquiry. Drawing on post foundational critical post humanist, common worlds and feminist new materialist theoretical perspectives, I (re)story encounters with diffractional companions people, place, materials and more-than-human others and argue that by troubling essentialised, developmental and romantic conceptions of the benefits of nature for normative child development we can story disability and inclusion in Early Childhood Education otherwise.

Key words: post foundational perspectives, neuroinclusivity, bush kinder, neuro-affirming early childhood pedagogies, post qualitative inquiry

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Introduction

In this article I share small, situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988; Rogowska-Stangret, 2018) drawn from the pedagogical narrations generated with/in/through my doctoral dissertation – a post qualitative inquiry which put post foundational, common worlds and feminist new materialist theoretical perspectives to work to story disability and inclusivity in Early Childhood Education otherwise. Thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013; Jackson & Mazzei, 2017) and one 'Bush Kinder' program on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung - traditional custodians of Naarm (Melbourne,

Australia) - I (re)story encounters with diffractive companions people, place, materials and more-than-human others. I argue that by troubling essentialised, developmental, and romantic conceptions of the benefits of nature for normative child development we might attend to the ethical and political entanglements of real and imagined childhoods in contemporary Australia (Malone, Tesar & Arndt, 2020).

There are now almost 200 ‘bush kindergarten’ programs operating in Victoria (the southern-most state of mainland Australia), in which children, teachers and educators learn with local places (beaches, creeks, parks and bushland) for extended periods each week (Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Network, 2024). Commonly, but not always called ‘Bush Kinder’, these programs are now part of many universal early childhood programs provided in community-based, not for profit and commercially operated Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. Bush Kindergarten programs are mandated to include all learners, under national and state-based legislation and policy frameworks. They are subject to universal quality standards and curriculum frameworks which enact theoretical approaches broadly supportive of human centric forms of ‘inclusion’.

Research concerned with outdoor learning and bush kindergarten programs has emphasised their benefits for learning and normative child development (Chawla & Nasar, 2015; Community Early Learning Australia, 2022; Gill, 2010; Kaplan, 1995; Mygind et al., 2019). Yet, despite these claims this same research has often overlooked the experiences of disabled and neurodivergent children or the ways that inclusivity is conceptualised within these learning ecologies. Dominant instrumental and developmental discourses in research concerned with disability and inclusion in early childhood tend to pathologize difference. By emphasizing what children cannot do, they locate the ‘problem’ within and try to ‘fix’ individual children, while ignoring the relational complexity of ability, disability and inclusivity. Here, I draw on insights from my doctoral thesis in which I resist these dominant traditions (Christiansen, 2023). Employing pedagogical narration (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015) as diffractive theory-practice making (Arndt, 2020; Geerts & van der Tuin, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2017; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2017), I attune to a more-than-human sociality which generates different possibilities for being, doing and knowing in early childhood studies. Drawing on Haraway (1992) and Barad (2007) I activate diffraction as a relational methodological orientation to theory-practice making which goes beyond observation or reflection. While practices of observation and reflection in early childhood pedagogies mirror and reinforce sameness, diffraction attends to the relational nature of difference and its effects. Thus, diffractive companionship, as I conceptualise it here involves beginning with the moment of encounter and mapping, or making visible, the effects of different ways of being and thinking - while attending to the impossibility of ever truly knowing ourselves or others.

Opening a space for more response-able, relational and intra-active early childhood pedagogies and activist-practitioner-researcher subjectivities with/in early childhood studies, this article attunes to and amplifies the lived experiences of neurodivergent children and adults themselves, as well as the human and more-than-human others they are always already entangled with in the common worlds of Bush Kinder. I argue that by materializing different potentialities for being and knowing, it is possible to disrupt dominant knowledges and practices which seek to know children through instrumental, developmental and ableist frames of reference that render difference as deficit.

I begin in this article by first positioning myself as be(com)ing (Stables, 2012) researcher, contextualizing this positionality with a brief introduction to the research inquiry, and pedagogical narration as a critical and diffractive post qualitative (St Pierre, 2014; St. Pierre, 2017, 2021b, 2021a) research methodology in early childhood studies. I then illuminate this methodology ‘on the move’ (Shields et al., 2022) with a short pedagogical

narration by way of example. I conclude by drawing together small, situated knowledges (Haraway, 2016) and generative provocations for critical and post foundational approaches in early childhood policy and pedagogy.

Be(com)ing researcher

To live as an artist is a way of being in the world. A way of perceiving. A practice of paying attention. Refining our sensitivity to tune in to the more subtle notes. Looking for what draws us in and what pushes us away. Noticing what feeling tones arise and where they lead. (Rubin, 2023, p. 2)

Rubin reminds us that to live as an artist is to attune sensorially to ways of being in the world which make visible our [collective, human] inseparability from that which we ordinarily *perceive* as outside of ourselves. A way of being *with* the world not *in* it. Reading the quote above for the first time, I inadvertently swapped out the word Artist for Autist and did a double take. To live as an Autist, for me at least, is also a way of being with the world. It involves a particular way of perceiving and paying attention. It is an affective attunement to noticing myself and others explicitly. It involves feeling and un-feeling the world in highly specific detail in which the depths of connection and inseparability from people, from place, from materials, from things is both beautiful and at times difficult.

My positionality as an Autist is something that while known to me in different ways throughout my life, has only been confirmed to me through formal diagnosis in the last few years. I declare that positionality here in recognition that having a formal diagnosis as a cisgender woman is a privilege. In particular, young girls and older women face significant barriers in accessing formal diagnostic services and additional supports in Australia (Lockwood Estrin et al., 2021) and other countries around the world (Cary et al., 2023). I was lucky to have avoided the trauma often experienced by younger Autistic children and young people in education (Aherne, 2022; Cleary et al., 2024) and intervention services (Kupferstein, 2018). Being a non-Indigenous Australian with Scandinavian and Irish ancestry, I have avoided the violence disproportionately experienced by young Autistic people of color – particularly male Autistic people of color - in connection with law enforcement (Sylvester-Chin, n.d.). All of which is to say, the experiences explored here are not, and could never be, indicative of a shared or singular Autistic experience of being with the world or with Bush Kinder programs.

I re-read Rubin's words in the previous passage again and again, noting that in addition to Autist I could also swap out the word artist for teacher. For researcher. For activist. For advocate. All of these inter and intra-subjectivities involve a relational positionality and an attunement to how we might make visible our shared multi-sensory and multi-modal experiences of being with the world. All require that we pay attention. That we notice and respond. That we attune to what calls us into connection and what disrupts our own and other's ways of being-with, doing-with and knowing-with the world. It is this positionality that I bring to being and becoming [be(com)ing] a post qualitative researcher as living inquirer (Coleman, 2017).

Rubin's sentiment echoes that of Autistic teenager Dara McAnulty (2020) as well as critical post humanist (Haraway, 2007, 2016; Murriss, 2017, 2017, 2022), Common worlds (Blaise, 2016; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2016; Rooney & Blaise, 2022; Taylor, 2013, 2017; Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015) and feminist new materialist (Kind, 2014; Kind et al., 2018; Nxumalo & Delgado Vintimilla, 2020) scholars who remind us that humans are not separate from nature but part of it. These relational ways of knowing echo the oldest, continuous Indigenous onto-epistemologies on the planet (Martin, 2003, 2008). Though distinct from Indigenous ways of knowing - which are deeply embedded

within cultural, spiritual and ancestral connections with Country (Tuhiwai Smith et al., 2019), these post-foundational ways of knowing represent a turn to un-learning anthropocentric and colonial regimes and logics which centre a universal human subject in extractive relation with the planet.

Pedagogical narration as post qualitative research methodology

Storying disability and neurodiversity against the deficit narratives so often evoked in early childhood research—a process I and others call elsewhere (re)storying or storying otherwise — requires that we find the capacity to simultaneously hold different ways of knowing in our collective consciousness. From medical and social models of disability to critical and relational models of neurodiversity and inclusivity, I activate a (re)storying approach to map not only the differences between different ways of knowing but also their diffractive effects (Haraway, 1992). When put in conversation with one another through pedagogical narration, these multiple and at times contradictory ways of knowing weave complexity through early childhood studies and educational research, complexifying discourse, policy and theory-practice making.

In this article I return to moments of encounter (with people, place and more-than human others) with/in/through in my doctoral research which included a term-long period of dwelling together with children, teachers and place in one bush kindergarten on Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung Country in Naarm (Melbourne) Australia. The methods on the move (Shields et al., 2022) I employed in that study included walking, storying, wondering, writing, being, and dwelling together with people, place and more-than-human others as co-participants. This generative approach with people and place included recorded interviews, videos, audio soundscapes, photographs, and an (unpublished) book co-created with the children about the experience of Bush Kinder.

As a form of research creation, the project included writing extended pedagogical narrations. Written as shared stories or living inquiry (Coleman, 2017) they make visible ruptures in my own and other's thinking while I learned, un-learned, and re-storied taken for granted ways of knowing and thinking about bush kindergarten as a beneficial outdoor learning environment for normative child development.

Instead of conceptualizing Bush Kinder as an instrumental approach to outdoor learning or nature play taking place against a wild, romantic or neutral background, I activated a conceptualization of Bush Kinder as a Pedagogical Contact Zone (Hamm & Boucher, 2017; Hamm & Iorio, 2019) a complex political and ethical space in which multiple perspectives and past present (King, 2004) inheritances (Indigenous, colonial, developmental and post foundational) perspectives “meet, clash and grapple” (Pratt, 199, p.34).

Pedagogical narration as diffractive post qualitative inquiry

Pedagogical narration (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015) is a critical and dynamic, post qualitative methodology on the move. Drawing on St Pierre (St. Pierre, 2021a) I situate pedagogical narration as a process for being and writing with people, place, pedagogy and practice as a form of inquiry. Here I put pedagogical narration to work to illustrate that knowledge is a situated, embodied and generative means through which we ‘be-with’ ourselves and others in collective worlds. I argue that pedagogical narration as post foundational and post qualitative inquiry becomes both a process and a product of living inquiry through which dominant ways of knowing in early childhood studies can be re-thought and disrupted.

I think of it as a methodology ‘on the move’ (Shields et al., 2022) in that over time and in different contexts I continue to return to those encounters with diffractive companions

at Bush Kinder through new pedagogical narrations to look differently, to feel, to make sense, to (re)write and (re)story pastpresent moments of pedagogical encounter with different ways of knowing.

Diffractional Companions

Inspired by the children, teachers, families and more-than-human others from my doctoral research, I conceptualize diffractional companions as people, places and more-than-human others with whom we can listen deeply with all our senses and sit comfortably with uncertainty. The teachers in this learning ecology spent lots of time communicating with one another, with children and with the place they call ‘Bush Kinder’ with more than just their words. Through gesture, slowness and by offering, taking and making time - they attuned to children and to one another and place relationally. Their approach to time in stark contrast to the oft heard refrains in early childhood education about the strictures of schedules and time-poor teaching teams experiencing a system and workforce increasingly considered to be ‘in crisis’ (Australian Childcare Alliance, 2023).

Each of the teachers highlighted that their ways of working prioritize relationships and time, acknowledging the need for slow, politically and ethically intentional pedagogies. By privileging relationships and time, they made space for sitting comfortably with uncertainty. Perhaps most importantly, they were determined to stay with that trouble (Haraway, 2016) and come to understand one another and themselves through different ways of knowing.

One of the teachers referred to this as reflective companionship. However, rather than simply reflecting sameness they leaned into difference. This evoked for me the critical and post foundational motif of diffraction. Diffractional companions, I argue, are those human and more-than-human relations with whom we seek out different ways of knowing and enjoy the opportunity to challenge taken for granted thinking – making time to sit comfortably with uncertainty. I activate pedagogical narration as a generative means of making visible the complexity of early childhood pedagogy, practice and policy as an embodied, relational and diffractional way of being with the world. In the next section I share a short pedagogical narration by way of example.

Pedagogical narration - Attuning to Autistic ways of being

Weight leans heavily on my upper arm. I know this weight as Jules, before I see his face. His fingers and ‘crystal’ come into view as we begin to chat. This is sitting together with place, but it is also sitting as one. Jules’s weight is distributed sideways and through me - as if his center of gravity is within us and not him. I breathe in and then out as I move my position slightly with/against the bark and leaves to stabilize us both. Our weight turns to deep pressure and connection as we find a shared equilibrium. I know I won’t be able to stay here long, but I recognize this as both a greeting and an introduction. A way of coming to know Jules and his particular ways of being with the world. We turn our collective attention to Jules’s ‘crystal’ – an iridescent plastic companion – which appears like a hard flattened bubble, curled in on itself - a tiny imperfect cylinder. Jules has this crystal with him always in the time we share. Secured in a zippered pocket or in his hand. Jules twirls the crystal between fingers and holds it up to the sunlight. I ask Jules if I can record on my video, “The crystal says yes,” he tells me “I say no”. Jules holds the crystal to yes on the ascent form, then up to the camera and into the light to be filmed.

I return to this everyday moment through writing, re-watching, remembering and re-thinking again and again. Each re-presentation is a moment of diffraction - a sense-

making that occurs differently each time – like the ‘crystal’ diffracting different colors depending on the angle of approach (Tilley, 2019).

I have written elsewhere about multiple ways we might come to understand this moment of everyday encounter in the context of: Attending to different models of disability; disrupting participatory methods and supporting children to perform participation on their own terms; rethinking assumptions about child agency and autonomy; de-centring without ignoring human subjects; learning to be affected by material and place relations; and the importance of attending to the past present realities of teaching and learning with stolen lands (Christiansen, 2023). Here, I want to attend to how we might activate this critical and relational (re)storying approach to make visible my own and Jule’s multisensory, Autistic ways of being with the world.

You will note that I don’t begin the narration by positioning Jule’s through the lens of Autism. Or even through the normative, developmental age and stage descriptors that would usually accompany a traditional ‘observation’ or ‘learning story’ in early childhood research designed to inform instrumentalist pedagogy and practice. There is no beginning, middle, or end. And no problem to be solved. I don’t begin with a list of labels, deficits or challenges. Or worse, a token list of positives designed to obfuscate the list of differences positioned as problems that are about to follow. This intentional move interferes with and makes us conscious of the many ways that beginning with the child, their age and expected developmental stage reinforces dominant ways of thinking which position the Autistic child in deficit.

Instead, the narrative is structured to bring the reader into this everyday moment by connecting first and foremost through the senses. Quite specifically by drawing attention to the embodied proprioceptive experience – perceived by humans through pressure or weight on our joints and muscles. This is often the first sense through which I identify with and attune to children “on the spectrum”. There is something clear about the way people lean up against or avoid bodies-materials-objects that draws my attention and noticing. Read as ‘communication’, being aware of how we and others position ourselves in relation with bodies-materials-objects can provide insight into proprioceptive regulation from one moment to the next. While rocking, tapping, flicking, clicking, or verbal stimming might be obvious and increasingly recognizable forms of stimming – sensory seeking that includes pressing oneself into others, seeking out deep pressure or additional weight can occur in ways that remain largely imperceptible or worse, misunderstood as ‘challenging behavior’ in early childhood learning ecologies. By drawing on feminist new materialisms (Kind, 2014; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Clark, 2016) we might instead attune to the ways in which materials and more-than-human bodies exist in embodied and affective assemblages - opening a space for thinking about and noticing what calls us and other materials and body minds (Price, 2015) into connection.

A child-centered, developmental storying of the narrative above would position the adult as observer, rendering them somewhat invisible in the intra-action (Lenz Taguchi, 2009; Hultman & Taguchi, 2010; Lenz Taguchi, 2011). Whether intentional or not this implicitly positions the child as a problem to be solved. By making visible the relational ways in which adult-child-materials inter and intra-act in the moment we can attend instead to a more relational way of knowing sensory diversity. This relational approach to understanding capacities, skills and strengths as ‘situated’ disrupts developmentally ableist narratives that can position all sensory diversity as deficit. It makes visible possibilities for teachers seeking to connect and build sensorially safe and culturally responsive relationships with neurodivergent children.

As a “practice of paying attention” (Rubin, 2024) storying the moment in this way also demonstrates at least one way that attuning to embodied and affective relations can disrupt disablism the assumption that disabled ways of being are always inferior. This

requires pursuing teaching as a way of being with the world, in which we are ...refining our sensitivity to tune in to the more subtle notes. Looking for what draws us in and what pushes us away. Noticing what feeling tones arise and where they lead” (p.2)

For instance, we might begin by acknowledging that seeking or avoiding certain textures/smells/sounds/lights/tastes or experiences need not always be understood as challenges to be solved, they are also opportunities for broadening our own and other’s understanding of sensorial safety, and mutual belonging.

This was already understood by the teachers in this learning ecology, although they didn’t use the same terms to discuss it. Jule’s desire for closeness and for deep pressure was known and explicitly understood. It was planned for. This included the teacher’s explicitly encouraging the other children to understand Jule’s sensory preferences. They didn’t invoke the label of Autism as a deficit, or a ‘disordered’ form of sensory processing. Instead, his ways of being with the world in terms of sensory preference were communicated as ‘another way of being’ (Sinclair, 1993). One, amongst many, different ways of being. Angela reiterated this in our teacher interview:

“We’ll say, he really loves a cuddle, he loves to be close. We’re saying, we’ll understand you... if he wants to sometimes come up and greet you in that way, we are who we are. Everyone’s different” (Interview with Angela, 2019)

Noticing that ‘everyone is different’ is a necessary but not sufficient part of reconceptualizing limited and human centric forms of ‘inclusion’ in early childhood education. Here, the teacher (Angela) attends to another important step in the process as well – creating a sense of mutual belonging in which everyone sees themselves as mutually implicated in everyday interactions and processes that can both enable and constrain the capacities of others.

Possibilities for Theory-Practice Making

Here I have privileged a moment of encounter which makes visible what ‘being with’ in sensorially safe and culturally responsive ways might look like for Autistic children and teachers in early childhood learning ecologies. In it, I have attempted to attend to ‘dwelling’ as a political and ethical act - not a neutral innocent practice (Nxumalo, 2019; Nxumalo & Delgado Vintimilla, 2020). Different bodies, after all, dwell with place differently. Often, in multiple and even contradictory ways.

Bush Kinder is more than just a neutral backdrop against which to practice limited forms of inclusion between humans (Karmiris, 2021) which I have explored in more detail elsewhere (Christiansen, 2023). Here, my intention is to draw our collective attention in early childhood studies to the ways in which pedagogical narration informed by post foundational ways of knowing – critical and relational disabilities studies, feminist new materialisms and critical post humanisms - might work to disrupt ableist and developmental pedagogies and discourses which limit understandings of difference to deficit. By centring play with found materials, making and taking time to privilege slow pedagogies (Clark, 2023) like walking, noticing, touching, storying and ‘being with’ what is already available in the common worlds of Bush Kinder, this learning ecology privileges Autistic play and embodied, sensorial and affective ways of being with the world.

As a people-material-place encounter this pedagogical narration highlights how listening with diverse ways of knowing can work to call us into connection with the material and the more-than-human in ways that expand our capacities for understanding difference and inclusivity beyond deficit. Dwelling together with place over time refines our

sensitivity to notice which materials and more-than-human others come to matter in educational assemblages. By conceptualizing difference as positive and affirmative in ways that remove barriers to knowing ourselves and others as capable, we can story belonging as a relational experience - defying deficit models of difference and disability which hinder neuro-affirming practices and approaches.

Thinking with post foundational, common worlds and new materialist theories in early childhood education requires that we attune to multisensory and affective relations with our worlds - consciously and explicitly de-centering or resituating the human to explore the multiple relational ethics of our encounters with place, materials, humans and more-than-human others. I argue that re-storying or storying otherwise through pedagogical narration as post-qualitative inquiry requires that we are able to sit, sometimes uncomfortably, with different ways of knowing and pedagogical uncertainty. It is not my intention to suggest instrumentalist practices or strategies that can be applied in different settings or contexts. Instead, I will close with some generative questions and provocations which might be useful to those thinking about how their learning ecologies (as assemblages of people, places, philosophies, pedagogies, power and practices) might consider post-foundational ways of knowing as a means through which to attune to neuro-affirming ways of being.

- What are the main senses through which you come to connect with people and place?
- Where do you feel most sensorially 'at ease'? What do you notice in these moments?
- Which materials and more-than-human others are privileged in our learning ecologies?
- What happens when we follow what matters to children as neuro-affirming intra-action?
- How might the lenses of cultural safety and responsiveness apply to neurodiverse learning ecologies?

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