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The entanglement of language and place in early childhood: a review of the literature

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the authors report the findings of a narrative review of extant international research literature to propose a conceptual model for how young children's language is entangled with place. Educational policy, curriculum documents, and speech and language therapy assessments in England tend to frame children as placeless and treat the place where language happens as either irrelevant or a hindrance to the quality of their speech. Conducting a narrative review, with a particular attention to the role of affect in what they read, the authors identify and explore three emerging themes in the extant literature that resist this framing: (1) how children's language emerges through place, (2) how place is re-signified and re-made through children's language, and (3) how place reconfigures how children are heard. Across these themes, we consider how place implicates identity, power, and hierarchies of language and embodiment. The authors argue that educators, researchers, and others need to attend more carefully to how children's language emerges *where* they talk, and to the politics of how language and place reproduce whiteness in relation to what is valued and what counts as language.

Introduction

In this review, we propose a conceptual model for how the entanglement of place with young children's language has been formulated in extant research.¹ We draw from several different fields – primarily from scholarship in early childhood education, developmental psychology, and anthropology, as well as policy and curricula documents – to explore how early language emerges with and through children's embodiment in place. We conducted this review for two reasons. Firstly, within our own research and professional practice, we note the significance of place and the body to when and how children use language. However, we find ourselves struggling for the methodological tools

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necessary to theorize their entanglement. As we discuss later in this article, we follow feminist scholars in defining place as the complex intersection of geographic, social, and material aspects of environment. Our aim in this review, then, was to identify disparate disciplinary scholarship that foregrounds the significance of place, in order to begin building a conceptual frame for how we might investigate the entanglement of place with language. Secondly, we find that dominant discussions of early language tend to overlook how racial and corporeal hierarchies shape the institutionally-mandated standardization of language practices, and tend to ignore how fantasies of white transcendence and human exceptionalism figure the hierarchical relationship between child and place. As anti-racist speech and language therapist Warda Farah has urged, ‘we need to actively de-center white ways of conceptualizing language’ (Farah, 2022). We agree: and this impetus to reconnect language with the body and place, in ways that re-politicize standardized talk (Flores & Rosa, 2015), is an aspiration underpinning this review.

Dominant notions of language imagine it as a process that ‘fl[ies] between lips and brain’ (Hackett, 2021, p. 16) of an individual child whose subjectivity might be neatly parsed from those around them (Appleby & Pennycook, 2017; Freitas & Curinga, 2015). Concomitantly, posthuman and more-than-human theories attend to the ways that ostensibly human social processes, such as language, emerge through and are mediated by a web of socio-material forces that operate both above and below the threshold of human perception. In practical terms, this means attending to how children’s language practices might be heard, detected, and felt, but also conditioned and evoked, by other humans, as well as non-human animals, non-animal life, and non-living matter. Our contention is that bringing more-than-human theories to bear on early childhood language practices, by attending to ‘where’ language happens, might help to rethink place’s role in language – in the cognitive conditioning of language, but also its bodily, relational, molecular, gravitational, and, fundamentally, political conditioning. We frame this conditioning as an ‘entanglement.’²

The problem of place: setting the scene

Young children’s language always happens *somewhere*. Dockrell and Marshall (2015) write that children’s language ‘reflects an interaction between the intrinsic capacities of the child and the context in which he [sic] is developing’ (p. 117). Here, Dockrell and Marshall frame language and child as two separate entities; place is merely a passive background to human interaction that mediates children’s linguistic *development* but has very little else to *say* (per se).³ Multiple scholarly traditions have contested this backgrounding of place as passive, non-agential, and nonpolitical, including Indigenous studies (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015), walking scholarship (Springgay & Truman, 2018),

and feminist geopolitics (Sundberg, 2014). Feminist scholars have offered alternatives, arguing that place should be understood as relational (Ingold, 2000), more-than-human (Massey, 2005), and affective (Truman & Shannon, 2018), as well as always-already imbricated with settler-colonialism (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015), normative notions of ability (Kafer, 2013), and racism and anti-Blackness (Baker-Bell, 2020; Brea-Spahn et al., 2022).

Likewise, scholars in the field of critical literacies are invested in how situatedness, sensation, and patterns of socio-material oppression work with, through, and on communication processes (Pahl & Pool, 2019; Pennycook, 2022; Price-Dennis & Muhammad, 2021; Truman, 2019). As a result, we want to think about place and language as more than just an interaction between two separate things (*where* language-ing happens), and instead as a more-than-human network through which children's communicative practices *emerge*: in short, an entanglement. Aligning ourselves with the scholars mentioned above, this review explores the literature on children, language, and place by asking how the construction of place through socio-material forces is entangled with children's language(ing).

Article overview

Below, we establish how dominant pedagogical models have figured place in relation to children's language, with a particular focus on the English policy context. Following this, we set out our methodology for this review, with attention to how our deep political and emotional commitment to this topic has driven our reading, writing, and thinking. Then, we trace three themes that emerged from our review, namely:

- (1) How does place change children's language?
- (2) How does language re-signify and re-make place?
- (3) How does place shape the possibilities for listening to children?

Across each theme, we consider how identity, power, hierarchies of 'proper' language, monolingualism/Anglo-centrism, as well as how bodies feel and (un)belong in places, all work to shape children's language. We also consider how children resist those framings.

England's policy context: early language, intervention, and environment

Young children's speech and language development is an enduring focus for teachers, scholars, and policymakers (Basit et al., 2015; Dockrell & Marshall, 2015). Whilst communication and language has been a key component of the Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework in England since its 2014 inception (Department for Education, 2023c), the renewed 2021 and 2023 guidance further emphasize early language and

vocabulary (specifically, English language and vocabulary), as well as embedding language and vocabulary across the six other areas of development (Department for Education, 2021, 2024). ‘Development Matters’ (Department for Education, 2023b), the non-statutory guidance for Early Years provisions, describes language as ‘the foundation of children’s thinking and learning’ (p. 5). The Department for Education (2023c) writes that the ‘development of children’s spoken language underpins all seven areas of learning and development’ (p. 9). Thus, language and communication development are significant parts of statutory and non-statutory guidance for Early Years education in England and are framed as essential to children’s ‘thriving’. This attention by policymakers is partly animated by concern that some groups of children might develop language skills at slower rates, and particularly highlights the relationship between socio-economic deprivation and lower attainment in standardized language tests, as well as the use of lower scores in standardized language tests as indicators of pathology.

Dockrell and Marshall (2015) contend that assessments of discrete language skills in one-off assessments, rather than exploring the interaction between those skills as part of wider language systems, have limited predictive power in terms of identifying and intervening in children’s long-term speech and language development. Yet, this has not stopped educators and others using the outcomes of these assessments to argue for the need to intervene in children’s speech and language development so as to ward off spectral possibilities of the language-less child, or what disability studies scholar Alison Kafer (2013) terms the ‘adult body with a baby’s brain, and assuming such an image prompts repulsion’ (p. 55). Consequently, standardized tools and fixed assessment frameworks label significant numbers of children as having speech and language delay: 10% of children in the UK ‘present’ with speech and language delay of sufficient significance to require long-term support, while 50% ‘present’ with more ‘transient difficulties and, with the right support, are likely to catch up’ (I CAN, 2009, p. 3). In the 2022/2023 academic year, 344,883 children were identified by professionals and families as having Special Educational Needs related to Speech, Language and Communication (Department for Education, 2023a), by far the most populous area of identified need. In some schools, *up to 80% of children* present with speech and language disability (I CAN, 2009) – a statistic that we argue illustrates the systemic proliferation of what St Pierre and St Pierre (2018) have described as ‘Speech-Language Pathology’ enfolding upon more and more children, as well as an equally proliferating market of purchasable ‘treatments’ (Broderick & Roscigno, 2021). We also argue that these patterns unfold along racializing lines, disproportionately impacting children who speak home languages other than English and Black British students when compared with white British students (Department for Education, 2023a; see also Brea-Spahn et al., 2022).

In language acquisition literature (which is mainly grounded in a medicalized and psychologized model of research), ‘environment’ is usually framed as anything outside the developing child (e.g., Rowland et al., 2020). Typically, researchers identify environmental factors or behaviors within the immediate family context (e.g., Roulstone et al., 2011) and, less commonly, broader structural issues such as the level of state financial investment in local communities (see Iruka et al., 2015 for a review), as influencing children’s language development. Thus, discussion of place is often invoked in deficit-centric explorations of the impact of economic deprivation and ‘poor quality’ home environments on language: these discussions frequently reinforce racializing and classist corporeal hierarchies (c.f. Basit et al., 2015; Li et al., 2022). Such conclusions are often presented as positive and empowering for families, with a message to parents that ‘the power is in their hands’ to achieve social mobility for children if enough effort is put into parental behavior and home environment modifications. Yet, in order for this logic to cohere, place and language must be regarded as discrete and individually modifiable variables.

Moreover, whilst the developmental psychology literature emphasizes the significance of environment to the quality of children’s language development, it also paradoxically regards place as a problematic factor that interferes with the quality of *assessment* of children’s language (Camilleri & Botting, 2013). For example, writing on the problematics of dynamic assessment (which assesses children’s language in naturalistic contexts), Camilleri and Botting (2013) contend that the physical context of assessment highlights the susceptibility of vocabulary learning to environmental factors, which extractive assessments are supposedly not subject to. In contrast, Duncan et al. (2020) conducted reflexive workshops with seven Early Years educators for a collaborative action-research project to develop the practitioner-facing language assessment tool, Early Language in Play Settings (eLIPS). The educators’ feedback that the need to extract children from their settings when completing language assessments was ‘not consistent’ with classroom practice was treated as a challenge to be negotiated. The researchers developed a tool designed to achieve a balance between ‘validity and reliability’ (p.6) of language data and the realities of child-led play in early childhood educational practice.

Across the literature on home learning environment and ‘scientifically reliable’ language assessments, we note a distinction between ‘environment’ and ‘place,’ where:

- (1) ‘environment’ is a series of controllable and measurable factors that research is interested in modifying to draw conclusions about language development; and

- (2) 'place' is a wild and unwanted variable that must sometimes be tolerated or considered as a limitation of the study in order to work practically with children, families or practitioners.

It is this context within/against which we situate the present literature review. In the next section, we set out the methodology of our review.

Methodology: a narrative review

This article represents the findings of a *narrative review* of the extant literature related to the entanglement of early childhood, language, and place. A narrative review is a summary of a body of literature combined with 'interpretation and critique' (Greenhalgh et al., 2018, p. 2). We selected narrative review as a methodology because it fits our research topic best; while we knew from the outset that there was likely to be only a small amount of literature that deliberately addressed our research interests, we suspected that there might be other studies that tangentially touched on similar questions or that would complicate our review in ways that we had not expected. For this reason, we started without a clear sense of how an attention to place might emerge in papers we read. Consequently, our purpose here is not to produce an exhaustive review: for one thing, our review was limited to papers published in English. For another, some of the articles only theorized place tangentially to their main argument, while the relevance of other articles to our topic only became clear when read alongside something else. Our engagement with the literature from this stance has led us to a more nuanced, even 'tenuous,' approach to literature review that emphasizes detail and flexibility rather than reproducing a canon.

Concomitantly, we are unconvinced that 'systematic' reviews can reasonably claim to be exhaustive: Maggie MacLure (2005) contends that 'systematic reviews' construe 'research knowledge as static, transparent and compliant with disciplinary boundaries' (p. 394). This process, MacLure argues, intends to replace reading, writing, and the 'unreliable intellectual acts that these support, such as interpretation, argument and analysis' (p. 394) with a tightly structured system designed to ensure 'objectivity.' Similarly, much of the research on early language assumes its own objectivity, taking as self-evident what defines 'quality' language and that children's developmental progress toward that quality is unequivocally 'good.' Consequently, we have resisted investing in 'objectivity' here in order to situate this review as a proposition for what the field *could* be.

Moreover, because systematic literature reviews are invested in objectivity and the unequivocal, they seldom evoke how research feels, what it sets in motion, and how it is complicit in hierarchies of power and knowledge. Cherríe Moraga (1983), in her conceptualization of 'theory in the flesh'

with Gloria Anzaldúa argues: ‘The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base’ (p. 26). We agree and, consequently, we acknowledge how our searching for, reading of, and writing about literature is not a neutral act, but emerges at the intersection of our own feelings (and already-felts), sensations, and political predispositions. This is important to this review, because the claim to objectivity allows problematic knowledge to proliferate: acknowledging our felt responses is important to interrupting that proliferation, whilst accounting for them in this article is important to its rigor. Writing as two white, abled scholars making a commitment to anti-racism and anti-ableism, we each have emotional/visceral responses to the work we read: to the elisions, to the pathologising perspectives on families and disability, and to the implicit (and explicit) racism and anti-Blackness, but also to the joys, resistance, and unruliness that many of the scholars named here invest in. These responses shaped everything from our decision to adopt a narrative review framed with a critical context, to the exclusion criteria we developed, to the development of our themes and the flavor with which we write about them. We further explore how this attention shaped our review in the next section.

How we conducted the literature review

The review was conducted by two researchers with backgrounds in early childhood education: one in primary and special education (David), and the other in community ethnography and literacies (Abi). The project was funded by Manchester Metropolitan University to explore what research literature already exists that addresses how young children’s language and their embodiment in place are made together and through one another. We conducted the majority of the review between January and July 2022, and wrote this article over the next nine months, finally submitting it for peer review in May 2023. We started with a small core group of articles we had already encountered (Dean, 2021; Flewitt, 2005; Gallagher et al., 2018; Hackett et al., 2021; Richardson & Murray, 2017) that touched on themes similar to those we wished to explore. We then derived key search terms from these articles, which we used to search the British Education Index and Google Scholar. For instance:

language development or language acquisition or language learning or language AND

learning environment or educational environment or classroom environment AND

young children or early childhood or preschool or kindergarten or early years or toddlers

We also completed trawls of articles in journals that we appreciate, searching for the key terms ‘language’ and ‘environment or place.’ Specifically, we searched:

- Journal of Literacy Research
- Critical Inquiry in Language Studies
- Journal of Early Childhood Literacy
- Curriculum Inquiry

We also identified many other articles via secondary citations, those who cited the articles we had already encountered, as well as articles passed on to us by friends and other scholars. Some of these turned up in our database searches, but there were others which we would not have otherwise identified. We also took up keywords from the new articles to modify our search terms. For instance, after reading Wynter-Hoyte and Boutte’s (2018) ‘Expanding Understandings of Literacy,’ our searches for the term ‘code-switching’ led us to Polly Björk-Willén’s (2016) work.

We also excluded many articles for reasons of relevance. One of the key criteria for exclusion was the age of the participants: some publications attended to similar questions of ‘place’ but did so with young people who were older than what ‘early childhood’ might reasonably encompass. For instance, Moje et al. (2004) describe how young people and their teacher draw from their home experiences to construct a third place during classroom discussion that then recontextualises classroom knowledge. While this research was relevant to our topic and helped inform our thinking, the study was done with high school students, and so is not included in the discussion below; likewise, Khawla Badwan’s (2021) work with 18–25-year-olds in Manchester was excluded from the final review. Similarly, we encountered several articles in the field of developmental robotics that explicitly theorize place: for instance, Morse et al. (2015) suggest that posture and spatial positioning interfere with mapping new vocabulary to novel objects for both robots and infants. Again, while the research was relevant because of its theorization of the relationship between vocabulary emergence and place, we felt that the emphasis on robots (no matter how ‘developmental’) made the study too tangential for inclusion in our short review here. We also did not routinely screen out research focused on children with special educational needs or disabilities, or children who are English Language Learners, which is a common practice in research focused on children’s language.

In total, we cite 50 articles as part of this review. Across these sources, we retroactively identified three emerging questions:

- (1) How does place change children's language?
- (2) How does language re-signify or re-make place?
- (3) How does place shape the possibilities for listening to children?

Our argument in this paper is that these questions might begin to provide a conceptual framework for scholars interested in researching the entanglement of place with children's language. In the next sections, we attend to each of these questions in turn.

How does place change children's language?

In this section, we discuss the extant research exploring how place – as a physical, geographic context and a socially structured environment – changes what and how much children say.⁴

Language in the home and in the classroom, indoors and outside

It has long been understood that children's speech is changeable depending on the physical location. For instance, young children may speak much less in school or nursery than at home (Tizard & Hughes, 1984, as cited in Flewitt, 2005; Wells, 1979). More recently, researchers have found differences in the kinds of communication practices children use between contexts. For instance, early childhood communication scholar Rosie Flewitt (2005) used longitudinal video ethnography to explore how four 3-year-old children's language practices differ between home and pre-school. She found that, at home, the children drew from shared, carer-child understandings to structure their language. In the absence of these carer-child understandings, and where time for talking was prescribed by others, children talked less. Instead, they engaged in a variety of different multi-modal communicative practices 'negotiated through gaze, facial expression and body movement, supplemented by speech primarily to be specific' (Flewitt, 2005, p. 217). Flewitt contends that attention to the multimodality of children's communication practices, as well as to the different levels of communication between school and home, 'implies neither a lack of language at home nor a lack of communication or meaning making in pre-school' (p. 220). Similarly, Bronya Dean (2021) explored how young children's singing changes between social contexts. Dean conducted non-participant observations of the singing practices of fifteen 3–4-year-olds using the Language ENvironment Analysis (LENA) system, which involves wearable microphones. Children wore the LENA devices for sustained durations. Dean found that the type of singing was shaped by where they were in the home, who they were with, and what was going on at the time. Improvisatory singing whilst playing alone was overall the most common

kind of singing and occurred for the greatest durations, whereas children typically sang learnt songs, or else songs with clear words, when singing to interact with others.

The scholars discussed above both observed that children's speech changed between places. Likewise, scholars of early childhood education Richardson and Murray (2017) identified significant and detailed differences in language use specifically in 'natural' learning spaces compared with more formal indoor or outdoor 'classroom' learning spaces. Using a case study approach, they coded the language of four child participants aged 4–5 years. The researchers found that the children tended to use more verbs, exclamations, and adjectives in natural outdoor learning than in more formal classroom learning, while two children used more nouns in the formal classroom environments. Moreover, the children involved in outdoor learning preferred more onomatopoeic adjectives than in the classroom, suggesting that children experimented more with experiential language. The authors suggest that increased verb use might indicate greater action-focused learning, more exclamations might reflect more emotional engagement, and the increased use of adjectives might be rooted in the children's engagement with a greater range of sensory experiences. Similarly, Hackett et al. (2021) identified significant changes in the language practices of 2-year-old children when their early childhood education setting adopted an outdoors-orientated pedagogy. Hackett and her colleagues argued that the shift to less structured learning outdoors 'unsettled the customary assumptions about what counts as language' (p. 926), resulting in a freer experience (for both adults and children) of vocalizing and experimenting with language and song. Moreover, the scholars' analysis of whole-cohort data indicated a dramatic reduction in the number of children referred for formal speech and language assessment when compared to previous cohorts from the same setting. Finally, MacRae and Arculus (2020) draw from the SALTMusic action research project to describe how two 2-year-olds engaged in improvisations during arts-based workshops revealed the imbrication of place and music with language. During the workshops, the rhythms and patterns of speech were mediated by the rhythms and patterns of movement of children's bodies, but also of non-human agents. In this way, MacRae and Arculus suggest that educators and others who are invested in children's language must attend to 'the physical and material qualities of the spaces in which we encounter families' (p. 53).

The above scholars all build on earlier scholarship to argue that the place where children's language happens changes that language, although they extend this work by also arguing that the social context (levels of adult supervision or participation, which adults are participating, etc.) further conditions the physical context.

Also relevant to our review are the structural positions of children's cultures, languages, and literacies in how children use language in a given place. In this way, place is invoked in the politics of how plurilingual students make space for their non-English languages in formal education contexts. This is because the classroom is 'polycontextual' (Gutiérrez et al., 1999, p. 288), in that it operates across official and unofficial spaces that are often 'characterized by their various and often oppositional discourses and social practices, [but] are also mutually constitutive and transformative' (Gutiérrez et al., 1999, p. 288). In the next section, we begin attending to these structures with a discussion of 'code-switching.'

The problem of code-switching

For young children, bringing different languages between settings is frequently a fraught process that can mark the bi/plurilingual child as vulnerable, willful, or pathological. Historically, many children were banned from speaking home languages in school settings (Anzaldúa, 1999; Saavedra & Esquierdo, 2020) and today children and practitioners are sometimes still informed, both directly and indirectly, that home languages are not welcome in classroom spaces (Badwan, 2021; Shannon, 2020). Often in this body of research, the oppressive politics of what it means to speak with different languages in different spaces – as well as the subversive acts of 'pushback' by children or families – resembles what Viruru (2001) terms the pervasive monolingual framing of early childhood. Early childhood education scholars Wynter-Hoyte and Boutte (2018) use Du Bois's (1961) notion of 'double-consciousness' (the idea that Black people in white majority societies must always think as themselves but also through white people's perception of Black people) to consider how an individual, middle-class Black 8-year-old girl adopts different modes of literacy between school and church. As the authors describe, this means that she and other students have to "leave their Black cultural ways of being" at home so that they can excel in school' (p. 386). Code-switching, as this strategy is sometimes known, is often framed as a benign skill for young children to learn to become more 'acceptable' within formal learning settings whilst retaining their cultural identity. Yet, as Wynter-Hoyte and Boutte (2018) argue – along with other anti-racist scholars (Baker-Bell, 2020; Cushing, 2021) – this merely gives children and young people the message that they can't bring their 'whole selves' to school. Moreover, citing the examples of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, April Baker-Bell (2020) describes "repetitive instances of Black people communicating in White Mainstream English and still having had acts of racial violence committed against them" (p. 31): Baker-Bell argues that these examples illustrate how code-switching between African American Language (AAL) and White Mainstream

English (WME) is not sufficient to protect Black people from state-mandated anti-Black violence. Consequently, what is needed is a way of framing language that decenters monolingualism (Viruru, 2001) and pushes back against the fixing and separating of languages into discrete, bounded entities (García et al., 2021; Gurney & Demuro, 2022).

As an alternative to code-switching, some researchers describe how children work across or between languages to resist dominant linguistic forms: this is sometimes called ‘translanguaging’ (see García & Lin, 2017). Language and literacy scholar Brittany Frieson (2021) explores how first graders’ use of AAL in a bilingual immersion English/Spanish classroom interrupts standardized rules and teaching formats of ‘formal’ European languages (here, WME and Spanish). Likewise, learning and behavior scholar Anna Martín-Bylund (2018) draws from her ethnographic research in a bilingual Spanish-Swedish preschool to reframe the ‘silent’ phase that plurilingual learners are commonly described as going through. Rather than posing the silent plurilingual child as non-agentic and requiring intervention, Martín-Bylund takes an example of a child’s silence when offered water to consider how silence is used strategically to resist following adults’ instructions, as well as being a deliberate non-verbal communication strategy, and an intensity that emerges between bodies (and so not belonging to any individual ‘EAL child’). Similarly, drawing from her ethnographic research with a UK-based Reception class (whom she followed into Year 1), early childhood scholar Christina Tatham-Fashanu and her colleagues (Fashanu et al., 2020) noted that children are more likely to speak non-English home languages in parts of the classroom where they feel unobserved. In this way, children self-regulate to switch between languages based on place: for instance, in the transition from indoor to outdoor spaces, when secreted away in a corner of the library, or during a ‘lapse’ in the teacher’s talk during ‘lining-up time’. In Spain, Inmaculada M. García-Sánchez (2010) explores how first-generation Moroccan immigrant children employ hybrid language practices during play at home as a means to create a clandestine private space. García-Sánchez observed that the children organized and negotiated the play in Moroccan Arabic (their home language) but then enacted their characters in Spanish. This served to make the play less transparent to non-Spanish-speaking outside observers, including older siblings and parents. Rather than being a practice of code-switching, these translanguaging behaviors illuminate how child and place entwine as a way of resisting the dominance of institutional languages: whether the dominant language of the classroom, or the dominant language of the home.

In this section, we have examined a body of research that grapples with the difference that place makes to the quantity and qualities of children’s language. This research traces the ways in which the full repertoire of children’s languages and meaning-making threads and oozes through place. In the next section, we consider how these linguistic movements (re)signify and (re)make

places, including how plurilingual children demarcate place through strategic use of different languages.

How does language re-signify or re-make place?

Freire (1996) contended that people transform the world by naming it. Taking up this contention, Margaret Somerville and her colleagues have considered young children's literacies as world-making (Hackett & Somerville, 2017; Somerville & Powell, 2019). This orientation signals what de Freitas and Curinga (2015) have termed the molecular within language: speech, conceptualized as a material practice that involves moving body parts and sonic particles, literally alters the physical environment as well as narrating the world.

Creating place through story, play, body, and (digital) objects

In ethnographic fieldwork with 1–3 and 4–6-year-olds in early childhood education settings in New Zealand and Sweden, Bateman and Cekaite (2022) rethink the common presumption that place (or what they term 'context') is presumed to be static. Instead, they consider how interaction in and with the environment, and particularly how young people emphasize or accentuate aspects of it, *shapes* that environment – by 'talking the context into significance' (Schegloff, 1992, cited in Bateman & Cekaite, 2022). For instance, Bateman and Cekaite describe how children's narration of the properties of a patch of long grass reconstitutes the outdoor play space. Similarly, Gallagher et al. (2018) conducted 'sound walks' with 3–4-year-old children and their parents and analyzed their language-making and sound-making practices. In the case of one parent-child dyad, the authors describe how tall vegetation is talked into being a hiding place for speculative tigers. In this way, children's language-making practices redefine their relationships with space.

Early childhood education scholar Polly Björk-Willén (2016) shows how the entrance hall of an early years education classroom becomes a 'transit zone' through which two children transition between their non-Swedish home languages (Arabic, French, Albanian and Greek) and the Swedish language of the classroom. Using video recordings, Björk-Willén observes the use of the home languages as transitional languages, for instance, when a carer leaves their child behind. She also notes that non-Swedish languages create privacy for carers and children in those space-times of transition for moments of intimacy or anxiety, to which the preschool practitioners (who cannot speak those languages) are merely 'bystanders'. Moreover, Björk-Willén suggests that these transitions are possible due to the presence of material 'transition objects' (e.g., mitts and shoes) or embodied gestures (e.g., hugs and kisses) that provide focal points for language transition.

Emerging research shows how the process whereby language re-makes and demarcates place can also occur virtually, digitally, and across space. Martín-Bylund and Stenliden (2020) describe how three transnational, multi-lingual families in China, each with children aged between 3 and 9, maintained proximity to relatives in European countries through the use of online video calls. The authors suggested that proximity and the language practices associated with proximity are mediated by physical objects in one or both of the physical locations. For instance, the camera on the video calling device renders body(mind)s visible or invisible. Or, proximity is mediated by objects that have transitioned between spaces, such as a bag gifted to one of the children by their grandparent. Moreover, with physical intimacy impossible because of the distance, verbal and material references to that intimacy come to be understood as a kind of proximity. Similarly, Flewitt and Clark (2020) use a 'day in the life' style of ethnography to recount how two children (aged 1 and 2) use digital technology to adopt new kinds of social practices: Flewitt and Clark explore how children's digital literacy practices operated across 'material resources in actual and virtual social spaces' (p. 465), arguing that children's Home Literacy Environments have permeable borders that flow across physical and digital spaces, remaking the boundaries between physical and digital through language.

Plurilingualism and third spaces

Some scholars of bilingualism have mobilized Homi Bhabha's (2004) idea of 'third space'. For Bhabha, 'third spaces' represent the hybridity that emerges when two people or cultures interact, thereby unsettling Euro-Western ideals of homogeneity. Scholars have taken up this idea to explore how the 'first space' of 'home, community, and peer networks' might re-constitute the 'second space' of the '[d]iscourses they encounter in more formalized institutions such as work, school, or church' (Moje et al., 2004, p. 41). For instance, education scholars Eisazadeh et al. (2017) conducted participant video ethnographic research with 4-year-old Ojibwe children during their play in a small, remote, Indigenous community in Nishnawbe Aski Nation territory in central Canada. Although not the main purpose of the study, the authors briefly describe how the children formulate spaces that straddle Indigenous and popular cultures in their dramatic play: for instance, they fended off the 'Minecraft guy' during a hunt, and constructed a UFO that later evolved into an aeroplane to transport them to and from their remote community. These might be thought of as examples of third spaces, where play is formed from across different cultural spaces. Similarly, Christina Tatham-Fashanu (2021) draws from the idea of third space to suggest that the bridge between home and school languages and cultural practices might be rethought as complex 'multiple bridges'. For example, she describes three children playing 'pirate ship' by throwing orange felted fabric at each other. The felt is then

discursively transformed into fire, and then again into confetti when one of the children yells ‘shaadi!’. Although the word shaadi typically means ‘wedding’, the child explains an alternative meaning, ‘party’, and so the other two also start shouting ‘shaadi!’ while pelting each other with fire/felt/confetti. In recounting this episode, Tatham-Fashanu illustrates not only how children make bridges from home languages into the classroom, but also how third spaces are more than the sums of their parts: in this case, the construction of an alternative meaning and etymology for the word shaadi (‘party’ rather than ‘wedding’, via fire and pirates). In short, Tatham-Fashanu suggests that an ‘appropriate metaphor for the third space might be an intersubjective “spaghetti junction” with multiple entrances, exits, levels and connections’ (p. 14), rather than a singular bridge between two cultural and languages. In this way, plurilingual children construct both shared and contested meanings that draw from linguistic and identity practices from across home and school, and put them to work re-making and re-claiming place.

So far in this review, we have discussed how researchers have explored the entanglement of children’s language with place, with consideration of how each shapes the other. In the final section of this review, we consider how ‘listening’ to children is mediated by place.

How does place shape the possibilities for listening to children?

Above, we have emphasized that place shapes how and what young children communicate. Importantly, place also shapes how adults are able (or willing) to ‘listen’ to children’s communication.⁵ We use the word listen here to stand in for a range of receptive communication strategies, including listening to spoken language, understanding signing and picture exchange, and discerning meaning in children’s own personal communication styles. Frequently in education – including in the use of speech and language therapy assessments – listening to children is framed as requiring silence, stillness, and a minimizing of background inputs or influence. We feel that this convention prioritizes convenience for adults and the maintenance of school structures over the creation of a more accurate, if messy, portrayal of children’s linguistic practices. Instead, we conceptualize listening to children in a more expansive way, even where that is difficult or inconvenient for the adults (Davies, 2014; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). Researchers have argued that the possibilities for adults to ‘hear children out’ (Yoon & Templeton, 2019) are filtered through curriculum or adult expectations of what children are *supposed* to say. Consequently, the limits of what the curriculum expects or is looking for, and what adults have learnt to habitually value or imagine, operate to shape and constrain the possibilities for listening to children (Olsson, 2013; Yoon & Templeton, 2019)

Scholars have explored how teachers’ reception of pupils’ speech is mediated by racial hierarchies (Bryan, 2020; Rosa, 2019; Shannon, 2022;

Thiel & Dernikos, 2020) and normative notions of ability and capacity (Shannon, 2020, 2022), with the result that teachers hear different groups of children differently. In a case study of two African American children from their own families, Boutte and Bryan (2021) identify the suppression in school of African American Language through the privileging of 'White Mainstream English' (Baker-Bell, 2017, as cited in Baker-Bell, 2020) as a mode of anti-Black violence in education. They argue that in certain school spaces, the relations between Black children's language, identity, and race are devalued, disconnecting grammar and linguistic features from lived reality, and in effect reimposing the 'mastery' of white people. Invoking the powerful, abstract, yet emplaced imaginaries of the School Playground-to-Prison Pipeline, Nathaniel Bryan (2020) unsettles bucolic white fantasies of the role of the playground in children's lives through his conceptual exploration of how adults' responses to Black boys' behavior adopt carceral logics.

Just as with the discussions of racism in the above papers, Flewitt et al. (2009) complicate what disability 'sounds like' by drawing from video ethnographic data from a small-scale study with three 4-year-olds attending early education settings. The authors consider how 'Mandy,' a girl labeled with Special Educational Needs, unfolds her language practices differently across three settings: a children's center, a playgroup, and home. At home and in the playgroup, Mandy engaged in multi-modal communication practices through a combination of vocalizing, gaze, and position, in addition to her use of a picture exchange communication system (PECS): in one instance, when a class reading included a birthday cake, Mandy 'rocks excitedly to and fro, vocalizing sounds in her excitement' (p. 223). However, the authors argue that more robust use of Makaton signing or picture exchange in the more formal education context of the children's center squeezed out 'intentional, idiosyncratic communicative competences' (p. 232). In other words, formal disability accommodations intruded on Mandy's use of her personal, unique communication practices.

The above examples all describe how place changes how adults 'listen' to children. Concomitantly, disability studies in education scholar David Ben Shannon (2021) explores how place changes how 5–6-year-olds listen to one another. Drawing from an in-school research-creation study, Shannon recounts a series of experiments designed to prompt a kind of synesthetic 'listening.' In one episode, the children lay on their backs on a large, square carpet engaging in a 'Deep Listening' activity (p. 14). Some children also wore sleep masks or ear defenders designed to alter their sensory experience. Following the episode, children reported how their perceptions of sounds were heightened, such as each other's 'shouting' voices, 'fidgeting,' and breathing, but also which senses were involved (for instance, one child reported 'hearing the sun so bright'). In this way, the Deep Listening activity carved out a new 'place' in the classroom, in which sensory experience was remade.

In all of these examples, scholars have identified how the socio-material construction of patterns of relation and systemic oppression shapes how children are heard in education settings.

Conclusion

This article has initiated a conversation on the entanglement of place with early childhood language, a field usually dominated by ‘scientific’ discourses of health and development that emphasize extraction and abstraction. The conversation is timely and significant; the increasing emphasis on young people’s speech in education policy and curriculum documents is placing more scrutiny on families’ language-making practices, how and when children use languages, and which children use which languages. Moreover, policies and curricula continue to adopt classist, ableist, and anti-Black ideas of ‘standardised language’ that target divergent language practices for early intervention, and that assume humanist notions of language as something that emerges from within a bounded, individual child, and not something that is entangled with *where* that child is. These humanist notions of language are informed by and reinforce fantasies of human exceptionalism (in which language illustrates how humans are neatly extractable from the rest of the world) and white transcendence (in which language resides in a realm beyond the body and its physical location). While a well-established body of important research resists these fantasies and the ways they inform language curricula and dominant modes of language pedagogy, we found less scholarship that does so through specific attention to language’s entanglement with place. Indeed, in our review, we found that most discussion of children’s language relies on some kind of extraction of children’s language from place, reinforcing the idea that language is not emplaced (and so feeding fantasies of white transcendence and human exceptionalism). This said, we also identified a growing body of research that explores the entanglement of children’s language with place. We explored this through three themes: (1) how place shapes language, (2) how language shapes place, (3) and how place shapes listening to children.

Our first theme mostly explored research from an ethnographic perspective, with most of the studies having employed forms of audio recording to illustrate different ways in which place (as complex and ever-shifting entanglements of social, temporal, political, and physical) shapes how much children speak, which modes they employ, and the extents to which they elaborate, story, sing, describe, and playfully experiment with invented words. Importantly, in the majority of the institutional spaces that children access, monolingualism is treated as a norm: anti-racist research and theories of translanguaging and plurilingualism have shown how children create moments and spaces of linguistic resistance to the dominant tendency to pin down what language should be and insist on its

transparency and clarity. Research we identified within this theme highlights the importance of grappling with the nuance, complexity and provisionality of how children experience or experiment with the possibilities for languaging.

Our second theme, the way in which language can be world-making, creating molecular bodily experiences and alternative possibilities or imaginaries, illustrates why the linguistic resistance identified in our first theme is so important. How children respond to and take up language differently opens up possibilities for different forms of participation and belonging in different places. The literature we found within this theme illustrates how children achieve this participation through language.

Finally, our third theme points to the unequal ways in which children's languaging may be heard or valued or acted upon in different places, whether by adults or by other children.

This literature review is an important counter-response to dominant accounts of language development, which tend to emphasize certain kinds of data and prioritize reproducibility of findings. However, many of our most fascinating finds in the literature would not have turned up via the search terms as we originally defined them, nor by relying only on those papers that we found ourselves. In other words, much of the work that critiques dominant accounts of language development would have fallen through the net in the course of our earliest narrow attempts at a more 'systematic' review. There is something generative, then, about our review's failure to adhere strictly to the methodological expectations of a systematic review: while our search may have become increasingly un-reproducible with each tangent that we followed, it is all the more interesting for it. Similarly, within young children's languaging, much of the joy, creativity, wonder, confounding contrariness, and generative opening-up of alternative possible worlds falls outside of narrow, dominant accounts of – and methodological possibilities for – what language is, what it is supposed to do, and how it supposedly evidences the mastery and exceptionality of the (white) human species. Just as with children's language practices, then, we argue that there is a greater need to attend to the messy, the oblique, and the incomplete in academic reading: the role of the scintillating, titillating, and nauseating, as much as the robust, equally-incompleteness of systemic review.

Notes

1. We are not here exploring the extensive socio-linguistic work on, for instance, language variation between geographic regions. Rather, we are exploring how language, including word choices, gestures, and babbling, are mediated by children's embodiment in place in many different ways and how this mediation has been rejected by medical disciplines that extract children from place for the purposes of assessing and improving language.

2. Entanglement is a bit of a buzzword in post-qualitative, feminist ‘new’ material, and posthumanist scholarship: however, in this article, we’re just using the word and not using it as a concept.
3. Across this scholarship, ‘place’ and ‘space’ have been alternately taken up and juxtaposed as abstract, embodied, local or global, and embroiled with memory, identity and meaning making. This paper does not delve into these debates and alternative theorizations: instead, we have selected place as a consistent term of reference because it seems best to describe the way in which the social, physical, and political are imbricated in where children use language.
4. We note a significant body of scholarship taking observational and quasi-experimental approaches to explore how different toys or other objects might change and shape children’s play and, consequently, their language practices: these papers tend to zero in on the object, removing both it and the child from the wider spatial milieu, which is why we consider them outside the scope of the review (Burroughs & Murray, 1992; Peterson et al., 2021; Sutterby & Frost, 2006).
5. We are inspired here by critical scholarship that explores how the ear reinforces racism (Eidsheim, 2019; Stoever, 2016) and ableism (Kafer, 2013; Shannon, 2020).

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