# Introduction

## Introduction to this study

The quotation in my dissertation title comes from Doctor Rudine Sims Bishop: suggested to be the mother of multicultural literature (The Ohio State University, 2020). Bishop advocates for *all* children to explore the African American experience through literature (McNair and Edwards, 2021). Her acclaimed metaphor describes this process: books as mirrors provide reflections of the self; books as windows encourage empathy for different experiences; and books as sliding glass doors allow children to walk in the footsteps of others (Bishop, 1990).

Scholars (Kleekamp and Zapata, 2018; Pompper and Merskin, 2020; Casey, Novick and Lourenco, 2021; Sciruba, Hernandez and Barton, 2021; Nguyen, 2022), whose findings are explored further in Key Chapter 1, continue to draw on Bishop’s (1990) metaphor more than thirty years after the publication of her influential paper. This demonstrates her perspective as seminal to researching representation in children’s literature.

Casey, Novick and Lourenco (2021) argue that children's literature reflects a society’s prominent cultural norms. Despite the consensus that representative children’s books are beneficial (Kleekamp and Zapata, 2019; Hayden and Prince, 2022; Nguyen, 2022; Luecke, 2023), critics report poor levels of diversity on an international level (Coletta, 2018; Heinecken, 2019; Sohyun *et al.,* 2022; Chunn and Collins, 2023). This disproportionately impacts marginalised intersectional identities (Lester, 2014; Crisp *et al.,* 2016; Henderson *et al.,* 2020; De Bruijn, Emmen and Mesman, 2021; Luecke, 2023).

Intersectionality refers to how combinations of social categories influence power relations between people, including race, gender, sexuality, and ability (Collins and Bilge, 2020;

Penguin, no date). For this dissertation, Bishop’s (1990) work will act as a tool for inspecting children’s books and their potential for developing young people’s understanding of intersectional representation.

Harris (2007, cited in McNair and Edwards, 2021) highlighted that for Black children especially, opportunities to access ‘mirrors’ in books were finite. However, more recently, Bishop’s (1990) work has been viewed through an intersectional lens. For instance, McNair (2016, cited in McNair and Edwards, 2021, p. 208) argued that African American children’s experiences vary depending on ‘socioeconomic status, disability [and/or] sexuality', arguing that these axes ‘should be seen in mirrors’ in conjunction with ethnicity.

This is a critical discussion within publishing in the United Kingdom (UK), with leading publisher Penguin (no date) finding that whilst 7% of students in England studied a text written by a person of colour during their GCSEs, only 0.1% would study a text by a *woman* of colour. This demonstrates the need to pay closer attention to intersectionality in the curriculum, as well as systemic issues with the production of children’s books.

## Significance of this study in 2024

The impact of this research will derive from considering how children’s literature can perpetuate the marginalisation of intersectional people, but also how books accurately portray intersectional identities and experiences. Despite concerns regarding sufficient representation, there has been a noted rise of intersectional media produced for young audiences. For example, the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (2023) reported that 30% of children’s books published in 2022 featured racially minoritised characters, compared to just 4% in 2017, whilst the popular Netflix television series *Sex Education* (2019-2023) hosts a variety of diverse

characters whose intersectional identities are explored, such as Eric: a gay, Black, Christian pupil (Hilkemeijer, 2019).

Similarly, Alice Oseman’s (2023) *Heartstopper* graphic novels portray the love story of two British schoolboys. Its latest instalment became the UK’s fastest-selling graphic novel and the highest-selling children’s book in two years (Creamer, 2023). Oseman (2023) writes diverse characters, discussing gender, sexuality, disability, religion, race, and ethnicity. Moreover, *Heartstopper* was praised for ‘keeping bookshops afloat’ during and post the COVID-19 pandemic (The Guardian, 2023). This demonstrates the huge demand and influence of intersectional voices in media for young people, warranting academic exploration of children’s books adopting an intersectional lens.

## Researcher positionality

The UK publishing industry has paid increasing attention to changing the perception that it is primarily white, female, and middle-class, which is further discussed in 2.4. I also identify with these social axes, having lived, worked, and been educated in a predominantly white and middle-class area. For example, in the 2021 census, 92.2% of people in Bath and North East Somerset identified as 'White' (ONS, 2023), compared to 81% in England (ONS, 2022); and about two-thirds of residents own their homes, demonstrating the homogeneity and wealth of my community.

However, I am aware that others face inequalities that have formed the basis of this thesis. I acknowledge my privilege as someone who is able-bodied, neurotypical, and heterosexual. Although I might be considered an ‘other’ aside from my gender identity, the intersection of

my personal and academic interests and experiences lie at the foundation of this research: reading and inclusion.

## Research questions

For the sake of my reader, this dissertation investigates:

* + - How representative is children’s literature, published in the UK, of an increasingly diverse British population?
    - How can children’s authors go further than writing books akin to mirrors or windows, and instead contribute towards greater cultural competence for diverse identities by creating intersectionally-sensitive children’s fiction?
    - What does the silencing of intersectional voices communicate to pupils via the Hidden Curriculum, and how does this impact efforts to increase social inclusion in the classroom and beyond?

I discuss in 2.3 how books most aligned with Bishop’s (1990) metaphor of sliding glass doors do not try to assimilate or celebrate differences, but instead are more culturally competent, a term discussed by Collins and Bilge (2020, pp. 212-214). For this reason, I argue that Bishop’s (1990) metaphor does not describe three equally valuable types of representative children’s books, but instead a blueprint for unlocking higher levels of representation in children’s literature.

The critical discourse analysis (CDA) undertaken in Part 2 of this dissertation will seek to expose how language choices in children’s books can go further than denying or praising ‘otherness’: investigating how dynamic stories based on the real, lived experience of those with intersectional identities are successfully executed. Thus, the CDA will explore how authors can

create books which act as sliding glass doors: not limited to reflecting historically minoritised experiences, or only offering an observation of diversity.

## An outline of this dissertation

Key Chapter 1 discusses intersectionality’s theoretical and academic roots, its application in the chosen context, the landscape of diversity in children's books and publishing and the heightened call for intersectional voices in children’s media.

Key Chapter 2 argues how a CDA is compatible with intersectionality and education as an analytical lens.

Finally, the Summary addresses how the research’s findings will inform an output following completion of Dissertation Part 2.

Key Chapter 1: The history of intersectionality and call for greater diversity in

children’s books

## The roots of intersectionality

Intersectionality’s foundations stem from the work of American civil rights and Black Feminist scholar, Doctor Kimberlé Crenshaw (Columbia Law School, 2024). Crenshaw brought the term to international attention in a 1989 paper challenging the oppression of African American women at work (Columbia Law School, 2017).

Crenshaw (1989) stressed that the experiences and analysis of race and gender should not be considered in isolation, instead proposing that a complex *intersection* of these was essential for understanding social inequalities. She warned that without the intersectional nature of Black women’s identities being accounted for, they risked being ‘theoretically erased’ (1989, p. 139).

Crenshaw (1989) explained that Black women experience discrimination fourfold: as white women; as Black men; through double-discrimination; and through the unique experience of being Black women and occupying two marginalised identities, through an often-overlooked intersectional lens. This has been echoed by Eden (2020), who writes of the faulty conflation of the experiences of white British women with the diverse experiences of *all* women.

## The call for intersectionality in the British, 2020s context

More recently, Collins and Bilge (2020) have established an expansive working definition of intersectionality, which considers how power affects social relations. They make the distinction that, when used as an analytical tool, intersectionality considers differing axes of a person; their race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, ethnicity, and age (to name a few); as

reticular. Crenshaw (1989) originally highlighted the interconnected nature of the intersectional experience as greater than the sum of its parts.

However, Christofferson (2021) warns that whilst intersectionality as a term and analytic tool has grown in popularity, its facets continue to be treated in silo. Crenshaw (2017) shares this concern, suggesting that by treating axes separately, individuals who are subject to discrimination for multiple elements of their identity face erasure.

Similarly, Woolf’s (1939, cited in Braidotti, 2019, p. 39) description of an ‘imaginary political alliance’ between marginalised groups could be highly relevant in 2024. Minorities’ shared status of being ‘outsiders within’ (Woolf, 1939, cited in Braidotti, 2019, p. 39) is supported by Faulkner (2017), who argues that internationally, right-wing politicians; including Trump in the United States (U.S.) and Le Pen in France; incite rifts between working people to detract attention from their weakened neoliberal states. They posit that many vulnerable people, covered by Collins and Bilge’s (2020) expansive definition of intersectionality, have been scapegoated to account for inequality.

However, Loizidou (2017) argues that there is still hope: that rising fascism and totalising undemocratic ideology within neoliberal societies can be challenged by consulting Foucault’s advice of being vigilant of our own ‘inner fascist’. They argue that we must be unafraid to interrogate humanity’s inevitable desire for power. In the current context and accounting for my own positionality, this further justifies this dissertation adopting intersectionality as a critical lens.

## Exploring Bishop’s metaphor in relation to multiculturalism, diversity and intersectionality

Gillborn (2008, cited in Chadderton, 2020) describes key policy trends in education and its approach to race, tracing how assimilation and integration, wherein differences were attempted to be eradicated in the 1950s, shifted to antiracism in the 1980s. In the current period since 2010, Chadderton (2020) explores how neoliberal discourse states that society has become post-racial. However, it could be argued that this is just another iteration of assimilation and minimising differences like earlier in the 20th century.

Collins and Bilge (2020) explain that as opposed to dismissing humans’ inevitable differences, intersectionality highlights how these are interconnected: taking the somewhat archaic term of ‘multiculturalism’ even further than ‘diversity’. They discuss intersectional analyses’ potential to progress from diversity and celebrating differences, to developing ‘cultural competence’ *(ibid,* 2020, p. 214)*.* This links to Bishop’s (1982, cited in McNair and Edwards, 2021) criteria for ‘culturally conscious’ Afro-American children’s books, wherein major characters are Afro- American, stories are told from their perspectives and within relevant cultural settings, and language explicitly identifies characters as Black.

By highlighting critical factors influential in this dissertation’s chosen context, including high unemployment rates in ethnic minority groups and the outcome of the 2016 Brexit EU referendum, which she argues was fuelled by perceived threats to white, native Britons, Chadderton (2020) suggests the notion that we are living in a post-racial, meritocratic society is false. This argument demonstrates the urgency of a more culturally competent understanding of the interaction of social categorisations, justifying intersectionality as a more equitable form of its predecessors: multiculturalism and diversity (Chadderton, 2020; Collins and Bilge, 2020).

Bishop’s (1990) metaphor, at face value, could be interpreted as describing three equally valuable types of diverse books. However, it could be argued that each element alludes to a different type of inclusion, as described by Collins and Bilge (2020). Firstly, diverse books as mirrors could be aiding multiculturalism, produced for children to read about experiences like their own. Alternatively, books as windows could be seen as passive way for children to engage with others, akin to diversity, which acknowledges differences with little activism for social change. However, sliding glass doors could be the utopian goal for all children’s books, offering more sensitivity to the complexities of intersectional experiences and more accurate insights into others' lives. I argue that books which are akin to sliding glass doors have greater potential for contributing to Collins and Bilge’s (2020) cultural competence and goal for reducing inequalities.

## Clarifying the scope of intersectionality

Intersectionality remains a contested concept, continuously reconstructed, extended, and adapted (Collins and Bilge, 2020). Similarly, Braidotti (2019) discusses how posthuman studies have revealed new areas of research to address anthropocentrism: the controversial belief that humans are of primary importance in our world. For instance, Braidotti (2019) highlights growth in fatness, fame, and posthuman studies. Thus, it is important to define what will be considered within the parameters of intersectionality, and what will not, in the context of this research.

Collins and Bilge (2020) develop this view, acknowledging that democratising diversity to include categories such as sexuality and disability could dilute analyses of significant and more widely understood inequalities, including sexism and racism. However, they suggest that

intersectionality’s expansive nature could also be considered a strength. Although theoretically, research adopting an intersectional lens in children’s literature could cover other human experiences as outlined by Braidotti (2019), due to the scope and time restraints of this research project, I will be exploring the axes laid out by Collins and Bilge (2020).

## Diversity in British publishing

Whilst diversity within the publishing industry has been highlighted as a systemic issue since the 1980s, when campaigning was initiated by the UK’s first black female publisher, Margaret Busby (Akbar, 2017), it could be argued that this has become a more pertinent area of discourse since the introduction of the Equality Act (2010) and its associated protected characteristics.

Despite diversity’s prevalence in major discourse within British publishing for the past decade, the industry has made minimal progress. For instance, Shukla (2015) commented on the absence of minority ethnic writers almost ten years ago and Akbar (2017) wrote two years later that the industry remained socially exclusive. Furthermore, recent research published by Goldsmiths, University of London, criticised British publishers for being overly interested in white and middle-class audiences, suggesting it still deems writers of colour as ‘commercially risky’ (Saha and van Lente, 2020, p. 10). A report by BookTrust (Anderson, 2022) found that whilst women are more likely to be involved in the creation of children’s books than men in the UK, the gender gap among women and men of colour was significant, demonstrating how a lack of consideration for intersectionality perpetuates the industry.

Simultaneously, British publishers have been criticised for poor inclusive recruitment. For instance, a survey commissioned by the Publishers Association (2022) found that ethnic

minority groups; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) individuals; disabled people and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were underrepresented in publishing.

In response, the industry has invested into inclusive initiatives. Internally, Penguin Random House UK (2022) set goals for their new authors and senior leadership to reflect British society by 2024, operationalised through a traineeship to recruit talent from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Penguin Random House UK, 2024). Externally, Penguin’s ‘Lit in Colour’ programme funds research into the barriers to inclusive publishing and diverse literature in English schools (Elliott *et al.,* 2021), demonstrating the high-level attention and pertinence of this issue in the current context.

## Diverse children’s literature and the call for intersectional perspectives

The Cooperative Children’s Book Center (2020) suggested that, in the U.S. context, children’s literature does not reflect society, whilst Gomez-Najarro (2020) reported the concerning finding that protagonists are more likely to be anthropomorphised animals than people of colour. However, much research continues to treat axes like ethnicity and gender in silo (Lynch, 2016; Casey, Novick and Lourenco, 2021), contrasting Crenshaw’s (1989) position that research should pay attention to where social categories *intersect* to tackle inequality.

Some critics have specifically explored intersectional voices in children’s books. For example, Crisp *et al.* (2016) and Henderson *et al.* (2020) report sporadic intersectional representation. Similarly, Heinecken (2019) and de Bruuijn, Emmen and Mesman (2021) found that black women tend to be overlooked and allocated smaller roles in children’s literature, justifying Crenshaw’s (1989) argument that representation should be considered more holistically.

However, as in Collins and Bilge’s (2020) earlier definition of the term, intersectionality encompasses more than racial and gender differences. Although most studies focus on these axes, scholars have explored other representations of marginalised experiences in children’s books. For instance, Nguyen (2022) described how queer characters are suggested to be more appropriate for children when they are embedded into normative family structures, demonstrating how non-traditional families could be perceived as lesser than the traditional nuclear arrangement, as well as the troubling notion that LGBT experiences must be ‘de- queered’ to become more suitable for children.

Similarly, Luecke (2023, p. 18) described the positive influence of gender ‘creative’ characters in picture books in empowering readers *and* deepening children’s understanding of others but agreed that queer characters are presented as more tolerable when they are white, gender- conforming and upper class: demonstrating a ‘near absence of intersectionality’. Henceforth, Chunn and Collins (2023) promote normative queer experiences as reductive, warranting the demand for intersectional representation of LGBT people, characters, and themes in children’s media. The researchers also proposed that intergenerational LGBT voices are needed, and books that focus on affirming diverse identities, as opposed to educating others. This demonstrates the bridge between books which act as windows, perhaps produced for the benefit of others to learn about diversity, and those that can act as sliding glass doors, which can be valuable for an individual of any intersectional background (*ibid,* 2023).

Another axis of intersectionality concerns ability (Collins and Bilge, 2020), but Kleekamp and Zapata (2018) found that stories about disabled experiences are often associated with pity and exclusion. According to their research, disabled characters with ‘agency and multidimensional lives who happen to carry... labels’ (*ibid,* 2018, p.1) are scarce in children’s books. Finding few examples of books which act as mirrors for Asian-American children with disabilities,

Meacham *et al.* (2021) concluded that intersectionality is more complex than combining one group’s experience with another.

It is important to note that children’s books which can be described as culturally competent are a quickly emerging area of children’s publishing. Nguyen (2022) highlights Love’s (2019) picture book, *Julián is a Mermaid*, winner of the Stonewall Book Award (ALA News, 2019) as a key text in this genre. Its titular character embodies a unique interaction of race, gender, and class: a story written for 4–7-year-olds which explores gender nonconformity through the eyes of a Latinx child (BookTrust, 2023).

There has been an increasing presence of similar accolades in recent years. For instance, The Diverse Book Awards (2023) celebrate literature from unpublished and published British authors, acknowledging the difficulty of accessing published diverse fiction, and the charity Inclusive Books for Children recently launched financial incentives for inclusive authors (Brown, 2023). However, there is currently no framework or award in the UK context for intersectional children’s literature, further exemplifying the gap in research, policy, and publicity for these books. Indeed, despite their Australian context, Jimenez (2015, cited in Hedburg *et al.,* 2022) described how intersectional representation is often absent from award- winning young adult novels.

Having established a definition of intersectionality, the context of this research and key scholars in the realms of diversity in publishing and children’s books in the UK, this essay will next consider the chosen methodology of CDA and its coherence with intersectionality as a critical lens.

Key Chapter 2: The case for conducting a CDA of children’s literature using the

theory of intersectionality

This project will adopt an interpretive paradigm, investigating disproportional representation in children’s literature and considering the associated power inequalities experienced by marginalised groups as socially constructed phenomena (Golafshani, 2003; Tubey, Rotich and Bengat, 2015). Thus, a methodology which uses qualitative data to discover greater insight is required.

Inspired by de Bruijn, Emmen and Mesman’s (2021) data collection, Part 2 of this dissertation will select a variety of children’s books for a CDA by examining awards, sales, curriculum, and library data, to establish the most popular and influential in the UK.

## Intersectionality as a critical lens for a CDA

It could be argued that CDA is an apt methodology due to its compatibility with intersectionality, both dealing with power dynamics: the former in terms of discourse, texts, conversations, and narratives (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018), whilst the latter is interested in how social categorisations intersect (Columbia University, 2017; Collins and Bilge, 2020).

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) explain that words inherently hold nuanced and contextual meaning, whilst Bakhtin (1981, cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018) concurs language is never neutral. Denscombe (2014, cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018) supports this, arguing that qualitative data must be deconstructed to understand its deeper meaning. They describe how interpretation and analysis are commonly conflated. By carrying out a CDA, a researcher can draw out, using codes, a measured account of how language is

used in contexts, patterns of language and the links between language choices and society (Wetherell *et al.,* 2001, cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 687).

Critics such as Riessman (1993, cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018) also caution that researchers must take care with interpretation. This can be achieved by exploring the background of texts; then coding key features of content, tone, style, register, genre, vocabulary, audience, and settings, and finally, conducting interpretation and analysis (Janks, 1997; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Mullett, 2018).

Cho *et al.* (2013, cited in Collins and Bilge, 2020, p. 5) argue that ‘what makes an analysis intersectional is not its use of the term’ but ‘what intersectionality *does*’ (italics in original). This highlights how intersectional analyses must be more radical than simply identifying the presence of intersectionality. Fairclough (2010), a key scholar in this field, agrees that CDAs can also be progressive, exploring social issues in addition to research questions by analysing how texts include and exclude certain voices and the implied messages this denotes about society. This is achieved through the researcher reading ‘along, between and beyond the lines’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 688).

## Intersectionality and education: a critical convergence

Collins and Bilge (2020, p. 43) posit that when intersectional analyses highlight institutional power, they have the potential to be activist, suggesting that this presents an opportunity for not only ‘doing research, but... empowering people’. The authors describe education and intersectionality as ‘a critical convergence’ (*ibid,* 2020, p. 190) and the potential for intersectional analysis to re-establish education as a field of power through its expansive approach.

Similar studies to this dissertation have taken perspectives from adjacent fields of scholarship, including sociology and English language (Hoffman, 2019; Rogers, 2019; Blair, 2021). However, few take an educational research position. For example, Hayden and Prince’s (2023) content analysis found that strengths-based portrayals of disabled characters are often absent in children’s picture books, concluding that further research should consider intersectional perspectives of ableism. This approach could suggest that exploring the portrayal of a particular axis, such as LGBT characters, with an intersectional analysis in Part 2 could allow for greater depth within the required timeframe for this research.

Alternatively, Vickery and Rodriguez’s (2021) research demonstrates how picture books can be used to teach children about complex social concepts, whilst Lester (2014) conducted an intersectional analysis of queer-themed picture books, portraying their potential to challenge the oppression of diverse queer individuals. Thus, there is an opportunity to contribute by adopting intersectionality as an analytical lens to study children’s books alongside Bishop’s (1990) metaphor, with the findings informing the production of a resource for classroom use.

* 1. **Interpretivist research and its ethical implications**

Kress (1989, cited in Wodak and Meyer, 2012) discusses CDA’s assumption regarding the social nature of language. Reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 1995) outlines interpretation as a unique convergence of reader, text, and environment; suggesting that awareness of the researcher’s influence is essential to this dissertation.

However, Tubey, Rotich and Bengat (2015) argue that interpretive research’s sensitivity to context allows researchers to embrace their personal insights. Likewise, Merriman (1998, cited

in *ibid,* 2015) described qualitative methodology as aligned with interpretivist epistemology and constructivist ontology, embedding meaning in participants’ own experiences.

Furthermore, the rich data produced via the CDA will be an inductive process, increasing its trustworthiness (Ulin, Robinson and Tolle, 2004, cited in Tubey, Rotich and Bengat, 2015). By establishing a prescriptive code for data collection, the research will become more credible and transferable (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The evidence presented shows the congruence between my chosen methodology and the analytical basis of this research. Finally, I will summarise key findings from Part 1 of this dissertation and establish its planned outcomes.

# Summary

In Key Chapter 1, central scholars of representation in children’s books and intersectionality were highlighted. I explored Bishop’s (1990) metaphor of books as mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors, Crenshaw’s (1989) influential work on intersectionality, and their relevance in the current context. A distinction was clarified between ‘multiculturalism’, ‘diversity’ and ‘intersectionality’ in relation to children’s literature and Bishop’s (1990) work; the status of diversity in children’s books and publishing; and the call for children’s media to portray intersectional characters, themes, plots, and motifs. The scope of this dissertation was speculated in response to Braidotti’s (2019) expansive framing of the breadth of posthuman studies.

Key Chapter 2 collated evidence that a CDA is appropriate for exploring the representation of diverse people in children’s books, due its shared interest with intersectionality of power inequalities. I discussed how Part 2 will conduct a CDA to explore how children’s authors can perpetuate marginalisation or be truly representative and contribute to reducing inequalities faced by LGBT individuals impacted by their intersectional identities.

These findings will inform the design of a set of progressive lesson plans in which pupils recreate existing fairy tales. The lesson plans will guide a class of Key Stage 2 students to rewrite traditional fairy tales, ‘queering’ them to become more representative of our diverse, modern society. This will be inspired by the radical work and progressive messages of feminist author, Angela Carter (1995), but applying this to an appropriate level for the primary school classroom.

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