

2010

## A research project contributing to African American children's literature based in the 1950s time period in Midwestern culture

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### Abstract

African American characters have been portrayed in children's literature since the 1800s. There is a lack of information available for children to learn about African Americans from the 1950s time period in the Midwest. Therefore, a nonfiction trade book based on African American culture in Burlington, Iowa will alleviate the gap in children's literature for the United States in the Midwest. The nonfiction trade book was based on Evangeline Ray's life growing up in Burlington, Iowa, in the 1950s. The vignettes portrayed in the book were created on the basis of 15 interviews with the researcher over a period of 24 months. In portraying specific incidents in her life, other events relevant to the time period were incorporated.

**A RESEARCH PROJECT CONTRIBUTING TO AFRICAN AMERICAN  
CHILDREN'S LITERATURE BASED IN THE 1950s TIME PERIOD IN  
MIDWESTERN CULTURE.**

**A Graduate Project**

**Submitted to the**

**Division of School Library Studies**

**Department of Curriculum and Instruction**

**In Partial Fulfillment**

**Of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Master of Arts**

**UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA**

**By**

**Paula Noelle Bolander**

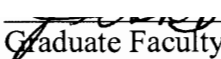
**August 2010**

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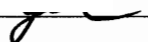
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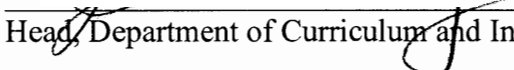
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Literature introduces children to the notion of their circumstances and heritage. Their literacy experiences influence their outlook on reading and on their social world. Children's books about African Americans living in the 1950s time periods in the Midwest are in short supply.

If African American children do not see reflection of themselves in school texts or do not perceive any affirmation of their cultural heritage in those texts, then it is quite likely that they will not read or value schooling as much. (Harris, 1990, p. 552)

#### Authenticity in African American Literature for Children

The earliest tradition of African Americans portrayed in children's literature was saturated with stereotyping. A seminal example of children's literature that stereotypes African American characters was *Little Black Sambo* by Helen Bannerman. *Little Black Sambo* conjured up images of monstrous exaggeration of the black figure and facial features, name-calling, bullying, and deliberate discrimination (Harris, 1990). This culture has endured grave injustices throughout history in literary publications dating back to the early 1800s.

In 1900-1920, a new class of educated African Americans demanded culturally authentic literature for their race and children to learn about the black experience through genuine African American literature (Harris, 1990). During this era, writers like W. E. B. DuBois paved the way for future literary works depicting African American characters. A most important contribution to literature for black children during this time period was W. E. B. DuBois forming a publishing company with Augustus G. Dill. Dubois and Dill

were accountable for three specific accomplishments related to African American literary publications for children. The three noted publications were: *The Brownies' Book*, *Elizabeth Ross Haynes's Unsung Heroes*, and *Julia Henderson's A Child's Story of Dunbar*. Dubois and Dill completely captivated children with the publication of *The Brownie's Book* reaching African American and Caucasian children on issues of education, politics, people, biographies, folktales, and positive African American characters, and the African American struggle throughout history. African American and Caucasian children could experience positive African American literature as represented in this letter published in *The Brownies' Book* from a young reader:

I think colored people are the most wonderful people in the world and when I am a man, I'm going to write about it, too, so that all people will know the terrible struggles we've had. I don't pay any attention any more to the discouraging things I see in the newspapers. Something just tells me we are no worse than anybody else. (Harris, 1990 p. 546)

African American children could finally see themselves portrayed in children's literature. They could see and understand that they were worthwhile citizens and contributors to American history, culture, and society. Children and adults could see children's literature as an important creation, which uplifts, educates, informs, spiritualizes, challenges, and reduces ignorance.

In the 1930-1940-time period, African American literature was further strengthened following the example set by W. E. B. DuBois. Black authors began to write about black people. African American children were allowed to experience African American culture through the eyes of African Americans instead of just the Caucasian perspective. This important era reflects the emergence of African Americans showcasing



their historical pride and accomplishments in children's literature. They spoke out about the injustices endured for so long.

*Chicago Police Kill 16-Year-Old Boy in Own Home* (Cowan, 1994), reported the *Negro Champion* on December 29, 1928. Two hundred police surrounded a young black boy and his siblings— one a crippled sister. For five hours, gun fire was shot into the apartment from the alleyway. After police stormed the apartment, 30 bullets sprayed into his young body (Cowan, 1994). We cannot forget this part of our American History.

Also, in the 1930-1940-time period, the Harlem Renaissance emerged in Black art and literature thrusting forward the works of Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and Dorthy West. Langston Hughes called for a daring and courageous celebration of being an African American in his essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, " published in 1926. He boldly proclaimed that dark skinned people needed to express themselves.

White people could either embrace their art and literature or not (Cowan, 1994).

Literature is a powerful vehicle in shaping cultural views and issues. Smith (2004) stated that in 1931 the Harlem Renaissance authors Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps became close friends and collaborated on many books for children. Smith elaborated that Bontemps and Hughes deflated African American stereotypes in children's literature joining a long string of Black children's writers who tore down stereotypes of Black characters in children's literature.

Bontemps and Hughes imagined themselves as the standard-bearers for a new black children's literature, infiltrating a literary establishment, which to this point had only offered biased and distorted images of African American. (Smith, 2004, p. 232)

Both writers crossed cultural and age boundaries with their literature during the Harlem Renaissance. Smith (2004) confirmed that Bontemps and Hughes undertook the creation of African American children's literature as an individual genre. They were the first African American children's writers to publish time after time through conventional America. Smith also stated that Bontemps and Hughes were largely concerned with representing the minority experience to mainstream America in children's literature.

Since Hughes and Bontemps brought fame and a certain cachet as Harlem Renaissance stars, for children's literature audiences in the 1930's and 1940s they became the salient examples of black creativity. (Smith, 2004, p. 230)

Smith (2004) also confirms that Hughes wanted to reach everyone in America, common people, educated people, Black people, and White people with literature that would offer them positive images of themselves and help cause economic and social transformation. Bontemps and Hughes paved the way for future African American writers and reformers.

The mainstreaming of African American literature progressed extensively from the 1940s into the 1970s. Still, in the 1960s Black Americans were considered second rate citizens. Many southern school districts continued to be segregated even several years after the milestone verdict in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, May 17, 1954. On this historic day the Supreme Court unanimously declared that separate educational services for Black students were intrinsically unequal and violated the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the United States Constitution. The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment guaranteed all citizens living in the United States protection under the law. Still, Black people could not vote, attend theaters, serve on juries, and eat at all-white restaurants and hotels.

It is during this time period that Black citizens made the decision to no longer be silent about the injustices toward their race. Rosa Park's rebuttal on being asked to give up her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery in 1955 launched a bus boycott and began the modern Civil Rights Movement (Cowan, 1994). Angie F. Ray (personal communication, July 6, 2009) reflected on the how many African Americans voiced their concerns and moved North in search of a better life for themselves and their families, especially their children. But life wasn't all that great up north either with life in the tenement housing projects (Angie Ray, personal communication, July 6, 2009). The Civil Rights movement emerged from 1955-1968. A much-needed change was in the air. As stated by Arthur Schlesinger Jr.,

I was present [on June 22] when Kennedy met with Martin Luther King and other black leaders. Someone mentioned [Police Commissioner Eugene] Bull Connor, and Kennedy said, we shouldn't be too tough on Bull Connor. This caused a stunned reaction. Kennedy continued, After all, Bull Connor has done more for civil rights than any of us. This was true because the photographs of Bull Connor's police dogs lunging at the marchers in Birmingham did as much as anything to transform the national mood and make legislation not just necessary, which it had long been, but possible. (MacNeil, 1988, p. 102)

When the Tuskegee Institute reported that there had been no known lynching in 1952, it marked the first time in 71 years of its record keeping that a lynching had not been reported (Cowan, 1994). A need for children's literature and adult literature to portray the authentic African American experience continued. Bad things were happening in this country, and the general population seemed to accept it or ignore it, reiterating that African Americans were somehow a sub human population or property.

Bishop (2007) declared literature to be a society's most valuable commodity and weapon towards inequality and ignorance. Banfield stated that in 1965 the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) was formed out of the Civil Rights Movement.

The goal of the CIBC was to create a more multi-cultural perspective in children's literature (Banfield, 1998, pp. 17-22). African Americans were demanding sufficient and truthful portrayals of their culture in children's literature and the CIBC sought to promote and encourage multi-cultural writers of children's literature (Banfield, 1998, pp. 17-22). Our society and its continued existence rely on multiple cultural perspectives in children's literature (Johnson, 1998). Bishop (2007) stated that up until the late 1960s and early 1970s contemporary African American children's literature had not come into its own. But during these time periods African American children's literature began to flourish even though its roots date back to a much earlier time period. African American writers had to forge through many obstacles on their journey through history (Bishop, 2007, p. xi). Bishop reminded us,

African American children's literature bears witness to that journey as a means to offer children and youth wisdom and insights that can serve as part of a foundation on which they can build their own futures. In a sense, African American writers are building, in the words of Langston Hughes, temples for tomorrow. (2007, p. xi)

According to Sims, culturally mindful literature comes closest to comprising a body of Afro-American literature for children (Sims, 1982). These publications would come the closest to portraying the black experience through African American culture authentically rather than through the white experience of African American culture. Books portrayed accomplishments and grit as well as the customs of growing up black in the United States. Culturally conscious writers of this time period included: Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, Romare Bearden, Lucille Clifton, Nikki Giovanni, Virginia Hamilton, Tom Feelings, Jacob Lawrence, Eloise Green Myers, John Steptoe, Mildred Taylor, Brenda Wilkinson, Angela Johnson, Patrick McKissack, Emily Moore, Joyce

Carol Thomas, and Camille Yarworks (Harris, 1990). The writers wrote children's literature from the African American experience. Some contemporary writers today include Christopher Paul Curtis, Nikki Grimes, Kadir Nelson, Eleanora E. Tate, Jerry Pinkney, and Faith Ringgold. These authors are reclaiming a place in history for African American children's literature to be heard and enjoyed from the black perspective. For example, the African American characters in Kadir Nelson's book, *We are the ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball* portrays strong black characters that strive for equality in an unjust world. These notable authors tend to set their stories in urban or southern settings. A Midwestern African American picture book would allow African American children who live in the Midwest to find a sense of worth and self-pride. Such a book would also help white children welcome and be aware of the rich and wonderful cultural and historical African American tradition. In the story *Life Is so Good*, George Dawson's father reminds him that President Lincoln did not work hard to free slaves to have his people be lazy and no good workers. President Lincoln freed them to work hard and advance themselves. In response, children's literature should reflect the black experience not hide it, for they have worked hard and come so far.

#### African American Picture Book Niche

Because of the arrangement and interdependence of illustrations and text, the picture book can be a powerful means for communicating society's expectations and values to its youngest readers. African American and multi-cultural literature for children today can represent a true sense of the Black experience compared to previous decades. The CCBC, Cooperative Children's Book Center, (2009) has defined multicultural literature as literature about and by people of color.

While African American literature is widely accepted today, books published and written by African Americans have remained relatively low in number. The CCBC (2009), which tracks minority publishing statistics, reported that in 2008 the total number of books published was 8,000, and only 3,000 were received at the CCBC. Out of these 3,000 CCBC received books only 172 (5.7%) were about African Americans and African American authors wrote 83 books. In 2007, there were 5,000 books published and 3,000 books received by the CCBC. Of the 5,000 books published, 150 (3%) were about African Americans and Black authors wrote 77 books. As of July 1, 2005, African Americans made up 12.8% of the U.S. population or 37,909,341 people (Census Bureau, 2009). There is still more work to be done in the writing and publication area of African American literature for children.

All children deserve books in which they can see themselves and the world in which they live reflected. Multicultural literature belongs in every classroom and library -- on the shelves and in the hands of children, librarians, and teachers. The challenge for librarians, teachers and others is identifying authentic, reliable books by and about people of color. This page is designed to provide resources to aid in that search (CCBC, 2009).

Modern African American picture book authors have added a new dimension in portraying Black characters as strong contributors to history and American society. Picture books have depth in writing and illustration to inspire all students in learning about African Americans and their culture. Such authors as Nikki Grimes, Kadir Nelson, Jerry Pinkney, Patricia Polacco, Faith Ringgold, and Eleanora Tate have incorporated authenticity of the Black experience instead of the stereotypical writings through White standards and experiences in literature for children. All of these contemporary writers of

African American children's literature portray African American characters in non-stereotypical ways with dignity.

Nikki Grimes has created picture books of promise and hope. In the story *Barack Obama Son of Promise, Child of Hope* a young boy guided by his single mother learns about the life of Barack Obama. Even though Obama's parents were divorced and circumstances were not ideal, he rose above to help the poor and become leader of our country. Collier's collage type style lends well to the message of diversity and hope. Many African American children will read this book and dream of becoming President.

Kadir Nelson targeted the achievements of African Americans in the baseball Negro League in *We are the Ship; the Story of Negro League Baseball*. The Negro League constructed itself out of necessity and purpose. Nelson recorded Hank Aaron's experiences in remembering when during the twenties, thirties, and most of the forties the African American baseball player could only dream of playing on the Negro Leagues, until Jackie Robinson signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Nelson's illustrations are fresh, strong, bold, concrete, and reminiscent of time long ago. Nelson (2008) reported how on February 20, 1920 a Black baseball player from the south called together all of the owners of the Black baseball teams in the Midwest on February 20, 1920 setting up the Negro National League. Nelson told the story from an unknown narrator as if reminiscing about the past. His illustrations create images frozen in time. It is as if the baseball players have taken time out from playing the game they love to stop and pose for a picture and an illustration was born. His oil paintings afford the players dignity and complement the text explicitly.

Jerry Pinkney recalled African American folktales and history through children's books. His watercolor and pencil techniques lend a realistic style of illustration. The African American characters in his children's books demonstrate pride and strength. In the picture book *The Talking Eggs: a Folktale from the American South* retold by Robert D. San Souci and illustrated by Jerry Pinkney, the main lesson demonstrated how good values were rewarded and greediness punished. Pinkney's illustrations are luxuriant, in depth watercolor and pencil art, to support the story and complement its lesson.

Patricia Polacco, who is not African American herself, has woven history, family tradition, and folklore into her stories for children. Her picture book *Pink and Say* highlights the friendship of Pink, a fifteen-year-old African-American Union soldier, and Say, his poor white comrade. They nursed each other back to health from a battle wounds. The two boys were imprisoned at Andersonville. Based on a true story from Polacco's own family, Polacco wove a story of an unlikely friendship that develops during the Civil War era.

Faith Ringgold combined fine art with authentic African American experiences in her children's books. In *Tar Beach*, Harlem-born artist Faith Ringgold expanded on one of her unique quilt paintings to create an amazingly colorful book drawings on her own imaginative life as a child. This book combined her life story, fictional components, illustration, painting, and quilt making. *The Invisible Princess* published in 1999 was an emotional story about a family living in the time of slavery. The story features themes of love, faith, and peace. The illustrations feature Faith Ringgold's simple yet detailed style of painting. It is another story for children that helps them relate to a period of American history that is hard to understand.



Eleanora Tate has written mostly fiction for young children. In the book *Celeste's Harlem Renaissance*, young Celeste left North Carolina to stay with her enchanting Aunt Valentina in New York. Thirteen-year-old Celeste discovered the Harlem Renaissance in full momentum. Set in 1921, the book portrayed growing up black and female in the 1920's in America. Tate has written for young adults in an inspiring manner that facilitates knowledge and understanding of African American culture.

Each of these titles features a central African American character. Each portrays a character who affords young children—particularly African American children—a strong African American role model. Still, an experience not yet in that literary corpus is the experience of African Americans from the Midwest in the 1950s pre-Civil Rights era. Creating a nonfiction trade book for children about African Americans in the Midwest in the 1950s could add depth to the present contemporary children's literature portraying African Americans. This particular literacy niche could fit the social studies objectives in the Burlington (Iowa) Public schools curriculum. Epstein (1993) believed:

In addition to teaching children about the commonality and diversity of the American experience, the study of history also illustrates how people in other times and places lived and interacted. Learning the histories of other societies or civilizations is naturally intriguing to the young.

A narrative nonfiction trade book would be a memorable way to teach local history. Epstein (1993) acknowledged that the study of history takes pride in our country's diversity highlighting the nuance of experiences of all races of men and women.

## Burlington, Iowa Social Studies Curriculum Connections

A nonfiction trade book for children would enrich the social studies curriculum in Burlington, Iowa supporting several academic content standards for grades third through fifth. The content standards supported by such literature are as follows (citation):

### ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

#### 1. History

Students use materials drawn from the diversity of human experience to analyze and interpret significant events, patterns and themes in the history of Burlington, the state of Iowa, the United States, and the world.

#### Benchmarks

By the end of the 3-5 program:

- A. Construct time lines to demonstrate an understanding of units of time and chronological order.
- B. Describe the cultural patterns that are evident in North America today as a result of exploration, colonization, and conflict.
- C. Explain how new developments led to the growth of the United States.

### ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

#### 2. People in Societies

Students will understand the role of genetics and environmental factors on human behavior and will link with an understanding that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity and behavior

#### Benchmarks

By the end of the 3-5 program:

- A. Explain the reasons various cultural groups came to North America. (Native American, Spanish, English, French, Dutch, African Americans, Chinese, etc.)
- B. Talk about the various cultures of the United States and how they work together.

### ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

#### 6. Social Studies Skills and Methods

Students collect, organize, evaluate and synthesize information from multiple sources to draw logical conclusions. Students communicate this information using appropriate social studies terminology in oral, written or multimedia form and apply what they have learned to societal issues in simulated or real-world settings.

By the end of the 3-5 program:

- A. Obtain information from a variety of primary and secondary sources using the component parts of the source.
- B. Use a variety of sources to organize information and draw inferences.

C. Use problem-solving skills to make decisions individually and in groups.

D. Use maps, globes, charts, graphs, and geographic technology.

### Purpose

The purpose of this project is to alleviate the gap in children's literature for African American's in the 1950s time period in the Midwest by creating a nonfiction trade book for children based on a Midwestern African American experience. At the elementary level books are a basic source for children to learn about information and culturally significant undertakings of African Americans in our nation's history. Many different eras can be represented in literature allowing children from different races to contrast their life experience with children and families who lived during a parallel but dissimilar moment in time (Sims, 2009). Children also learn about themselves by reading about similar situations and cultures in literature. Noted Black author Rudine Sims expressed it this way:

There is power in the word. People in positions of power over others have historically understand and often feared, the potential of The Word to influence the minds of the people over whom they hold sway. This fear manifests itself in both dramatic and mundane ways-from the burning of books to organized book banning. (Sims, 2009, p. 8)

Children learn by reading. A nonfiction trade book for children (6-12) taking place in the 1950s in Burlington, Iowa about a young African American girl's struggle during the pre-Civil Rights movement would reduce the void in nonfiction literature about African Americans in the Midwest 1950s time period. Resources of this nature can help teachers and students of all races learn about the black experience through an authentic experience described in literature. A nonfiction trade book combines text with illustrations. Children are opened to new worlds and cultures through nonfiction trade

books. The interlacing of photographs and text makes the nonfiction trade book an instrument for communicating society's cultural expectations and values to its youngest readers.

### Problem Statement

There is a lack of available nonfiction trade books for children representing African Americans who lived in the 1950s time period in the Midwest.

### Assumptions and Limitations

One assumption made for this research project is that there is not a substantial amount of African American nonfiction trade books for children that represent the African American experience in the Midwest in the 1950s time period. Also, an assumption is that children's literature does not represent African Americans from the Midwest and therefore the writing of a nonfiction trade book would bridge the gap in children's literature. Also, the researcher teaches a high population of African American students where students fail to see themselves and their heritage adequately in the resources available to them. School libraries and literature are tools that can be used to heighten their awareness about their own culture and other cultures. The specific topic of the proposed text is not one that is readily spoken about in Burlington, Iowa. Information the researcher located at the Heritage Museum in Burlington, Iowa on African Americans in the 1950s was limited; the collection held one small folder with events spanning from early 1800 s to contemporary times. Some newspaper articles found did not have page numbers.

### Definitions

Authentic African American literature- literature written by African Americans or Caucasian Americans portraying the true Black American experience without stereotypes and misinterpretations of experiences.

African American children's literature- "books primarily for ages up to fourteen, books written by African Americans, alert to African American people and their culture and life experiences" (Bishop, 2007, p. xi).

CIBC- The Council on Interracial Books for Children was formed in 1965 out of the Civil Rights Movement. The goal of the CIBC was to create a more multi-cultural reality in children's literature.

Cultural universals-three important cultural universals as stated by Tieman and Fallace (2009) are shelter, family life, and clothing. These three important commonalities in culture are drawn from young student's basic experiences of understanding to connect with history past and present.

### Audience

The nonfiction trade book portraying aspects of Evangeline Ray's life and historical facts related to African Americans during the 1950 time period will be written for Evangeline, African American students, students ages 6-12, teachers, teacher librarians, and for the people of the United States.

### Research Questions

1. What aspects of Midwest African American culture in the 1950s time period should be addressed in a book for children?

2. What decisions must an author make to create an authentic historical text for children?

Developing a text to fit the available niche for children's literature about the African American experience of the 1950s in a small Midwest city is a response to these questions.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this research project is to produce a nonfiction trade book for young readers ages 6-12 that showcases a historical period in Burlington, Iowa, in the 1950s. Salle (1994) argued that a writer's imagination is capable of imitating universal human experiences and feelings and developing them in a way that surpasses cultural stereotypes remaining true or authentic to the culture. To develop an understanding of the story about African Americans in the 1950s among today's youth calls for consideration of several related aspects: nonfiction texts and reading, nonfiction texts in social studies, and narrative in nonfiction trade books.

"Learning about a community and its people brings a reality to history often missing in the general textbook" (Bonney, 1995, p. 14). Local historical resources planned for students have the benefit of scaling down national and world events to the local level (Iowa Department of Public Instruction & Southern Prairie Area Education Agency 15, 1985). The Iowa Core Curriculum for Social Studies (2009) stated that history is important for students to comprehend the responsibility of individuals and groups in a society as promoters of change. That document further stated that students in grades 3-5 need to process the effect of relationships in history in order to understand events and issues. "Understanding the past provides context for the present and implications for the future" (Iowa Department of Education, 2009, p. 31).

## Nonfiction Texts and Reading

In the course of integrating nonfiction trade books into curriculum, students make personal reading choices; reluctant readers are more likely to enjoy reading; and knowledge about social studies is formed (Moss & Hendershot, 2002).

Teachers Content Literacy (2009) states:

We are surrounded by expository texts. Expository texts are written to inform, describe, explain, or persuade. They include essays, speeches, newspaper and magazine articles, government documents, journals, directions, and lab procedures. Each type of text places different demands on the reader because of the unique ways it uses structure, features, conventions, and devices. Consequently, students need to understand the structure of expository text, how to prepare to read it, and how make meaning (Teachers Content Literacy, 2009, p. 1).

Saul and Dieckman (2005) acknowledged that informational text is often used in place of expository text. They stated that expository text is written to inform, explain, describe, and present information. Saul and Dieckman further concluded that nonfiction is used interchangeably with informational text and that most librarians look for informational texts for teachers in the nonfiction section of library, which includes informational narrative and biographies.

Moss and Hendershot (2002) reaffirmed when classrooms create an environment where self-selection was practiced, they saw students more motivated to read. They asserted that given personal reading time, students often chose nonfiction. They found that nonfiction books can promote reading among reluctant readers. Moss and Hendershot reported that many students choose books based upon individual experiences and connections with nonfiction content.



Bishop (2007) contended that African American history held an exceedingly noteworthy place in children's literature. Individual African American accomplishments, contributions to society, and long-term struggles have been highlighted in African American literature for all children to become aware of the African American story (Bishop, 2007). Bishop (2007) reported that a strong emphasis on African American history in children's literature acted as a corrective measure on historical neglect and curriculum omissions in the school. Historical information presented in children's literature can provide an anchor of stability for African American students (Bishop, 2007).

#### Nonfiction Texts in Social Studies

According to Moss (2003) nonfiction texts expand students learning in social studies. Non-fiction texts can promote curiosity in learning through social study topics found in non-fiction books. Moss stated that social studies was not made up of a single subject, but many subject areas such as; economics, geography, history, sociology, and political science. The studies of social sciences help students to make informed decisions in a democratic society and can effect social change (Moss, 2003). She also asserted that the social sciences cannot be taught in isolation, but should be integrated into one piece so that students develop various perspectives. Students can learn about the social sciences through non-fiction texts.

#### Narrative in Nonfiction Trade Books

Freedman's study (as cited in Tunnell & Ammon, 1993) asserted that the goal of any biographer or historian is to make the past seem alive and real. Freedman asserts that life and meaning are breathed into people and events that are past. Freedman's study

claimed that quotations and anecdotes are two writing tools that give a narrative nonfiction trade book realism and immediacy.

Liliane (2009) reported:

In young children's narrative or tale, the recounting of a series of events is done in a way so that the reader can have a cohesive experience and closure at the end. In the mist of simple words and minimally graphic, innocent pictures, one may have a tendency to think of how trivial the language seems (Liliane, 2009).

Liliane (2009) described narrative nonfiction as having great power to accurately portray fact in narrative text that describes history expanding young minds without traumatizing the reader and pushing them away from the subject.

Tiemann and Fallace (2009) researched universal themes and narratives in teaching children history. They found that young children can relate to shelter, family life, and clothing—three important cultural universals. They combined cultural universals with narrative text to provide connections to abstract facts presented in history. “Many of the students began to think for themselves and critically observed new information provided by the cultural universals and narrative texts” (p. 104).

Nelson (1999) explained that narratives provided children with an understanding of American history and government along with attributes of specific individuals that contribute to society. Nelson (1999) claimed that history education advocates stated that historical narrative is more interesting and comprehensible to students than the writing in social studies text books.

A narrative nonfiction trade book about African Americans living in the Midwest in the 1950's would be an important contribution to children's literature and the Burlington School district.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Purpose and Problem

The purpose of this project was to alleviate a gap in children's literature about African Americans in the 1950s time period in the Midwest by creating a nonfiction trade book for children. At the elementary level, books are a basic source for children to learn about information and culturally significant undertakings of African Americans in our nation's history.

#### Research Questions

This project required the researcher to address the following questions:

1. What aspects of Midwest African American culture in the 1950s time period were addressed in a book for children?
2. What decisions must an author make to create an authentic historical text for children?

#### Procedures

The creation of this nonfiction trade book proceeded with the following steps:

- The researcher sought and received written permission from Evangeline Ray for the use of her story to provide the content for the nonfiction text to be created.  
(See Appendix A for permissions request form)
- The researcher interviewed Evangeline Ray 15 times over a time period beginning 8/08 and ending 7/28/10.
- A storyboard was created.

- Documents available at the Burlington Public Library and the Burlington Historical Museum were reviewed to provide context to the information collected from interviews..
- The text of the book was composed.
- Evangeline Florence Ray provided photographs of the area, herself and her family.
- Photo release forms were placed on file in the University of Northern Iowa School Library Studies Office. (See Appendix A)
- Photos were scanned to prepare them for insertion into the book.
- A layout of the pages with photographs accompanied the text was designed for ages 6-12.
- A cover and title page was created.
- Stephanie Cook edited the picture book for correct grammar.
- Christine Larkins read the picture book for dance authenticity.
- Sharon Rexroth, children's author, reviewed the picture book for age appropriateness.
- A final meeting with Angie Ray was conducted to fact check the story of her life.
- The book was printed and bound.

## CHAPTER 4

See the project entitled “Momma, is my skin dirty?”

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher discovered that there was a scarcity of children's literature portraying the African American experience in the Midwest, particularly in the pre-Civil Rights era of the 1950's. The purpose of this project was to alleviate that gap in children's literature by creating a nonfiction trade book for children portraying an African American experience in Burlington, Iowa in that time period. Through the creation of this text, the efficacy of children's literature for African Americans can be justified. The common humanity that connects us all can be improved and valued.

The book aligns with Burlington School District social studies curriculum. The historical aspect of the research project is inclusive of African Americans in Iowa in the 1950s era. Information includes roles in the work place, local society, recreation, family traditions, and economics. Another historical aspect is the role that African American women played in the 1950s in their work, family, school, and church communities.

#### Decisions of an Author

##### Voice

Seven vignettes reflect the voice of Angie Ray. Her adult voice today has reflective insight into what she experienced as a child. Initial interviews with Angie engendered a desire to re-create the experience of listening to her tell her own story. The foreword of the book invites the reader to imagine a setting on a porch in Burlington, Iowa, overlooking the Mississippi river, listening to Angie Ray tell her story. In this way the researcher sought to introduce the voice to be heard in the text.

To develop an ear for an authentic African American voice, the author read several of Eleanora Tate's books. In addition, multiple interviews with Angie Ray served to both gather the vignettes and to learn the cadence and style of Angie's voice.

#### Text Structure

The author decided to create a narrative text using chronology to give the text structure and meaning. To highlight that text structure, each vignette begins by identifying the year of occurrence. The chronology begins in 1950 and ends in 1957.

#### Audience

The author selected 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade students for the audience because they are in the midst of many challenges and changes just like the main character. They remember being little, but yet want to grow up so badly. Angie's story would inspire young students to face their challenges and not give up. The Burlington School District curriculum further justifies this audience since local history is a part of the social studies curriculum at these grade levels. Students use materials drawn from the diversity of human experience to analyze and interpret significant events, patterns and themes in the history of Burlington.

#### Content

The vignettes were chosen for their universal connection amidst a child's relationship with mother, father, sister, and friend. While the themes of these relationships have universality, they are particular for this character. This combination of the particular and the universal provides opportunities for the book to be both a window to another world and a mirror for self-awareness to enrich children's literary experience.

In the same regard vignettes that created tension were chosen to develop an engaging and interesting text.

Discussion questions were provided to increase historical knowledge and reflection. Vocabulary was added also to support the Burlington School district initiative Every Child Reads.

### Context

Lest it be forgotten, children of today need to know about the happenings in this time period in our country's history. Further, by providing a text set in their own community, the book brings closer to home experiences that textbooks and other resources may treat as remote events in history.

### Layout

The researcher began to create the text using Microsoft Word. Attempts to use a template in this software resulted in several formatting problems, including the insertion of extra blank pages and difficulties with inserting gutters to allow for binding. These problems resulted in shifting to Apple Pages software because it affords more page layout options and easier manipulation of text, graphics, pagination, and images.

Experimentation with portrait and landscape layout led the researcher to choose landscape to better accommodate the photographs and improve the page flow of the text. A serif Garamond font was chosen for readability and Arial black was chosen for headings to add contrast.

Informational pullouts were inserted to provide background knowledge about events of United States history concurrent with the events conveyed in the vignettes.



An author faces many decisions in order to achieve a book that communicates well to its audience. These decisions address not only content, but also format and technologies that all contribute to the final impact of the work.

### Significance and Conclusions

The universal human experience of struggle and hope portrayed through Angie Ray's experience growing up African American in the Midwest in the 1950s can be shared with many different cultures through this poignant story. The carefully chosen vignettes depicted universal human commonalities. Events that occurred during the 1950s in the United States echoed local events of the time period. An authentic historical text could not have been made without research through print, electronic, and oral representative facts. The story reflected a time of innocence contrasted with the basic human need to survive and triumph over difficulties.

The contribution to the Burlington Social Studies curriculum is endless. Facts portraying the broader events of United States history are laid out in chronological order. The chronological events of the United States complement and clarify the events that took place Angie's life in the early 1950s. The documentation of both sequential events supports the Burlington Social Studies curriculum in that students learn about another culture and time through an authentic African American voice written by a white author. If the author had grown up with Angie Ray, she would have been her friend.

### Recommendations

The researcher will seek ways to share the book with teachers, especially those in Burlington, Iowa. Furthermore, the author will seek avenues for publishing through these possible people and publishers: Deb Levitov, Charline J. Barnes, Eleanora Tate, Mrs. Sharon Rexroth, Peach Tree Publishing, Kadir Nelson Publishing, and the University of Iowa Press.

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APPENDIX A  
PHOTOGRAPH CONSENT FORM

Project Title: A research project contributing to African American children's literature based in the 1950s time period in Midwestern culture.

Principal Investigator: Paula Bolander

I grant permission for \_\_\_\_\_ to use my photographs in her nonfiction trade book about the black experience in the Midwest in the 1950s. I understand that it is my decision to provide photographs for this project.

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

## REFERENCE LIST OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS CITED

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