

## IN CONVERSATION WITH

# NATASHA HENRY

## *African Canadian Experiences and the Curriculum*

### **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

*Black, history, educators, classroom, anti-Black racism, teaching and learning, African Canadian, students, stories, curriculum, Equity*

### **SPEAKERS**

Shayle Graham, Natasha Henry

### **RESOURCES**

[Ontario Black History Society](#)

[Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario: 365 Black Canadian Curriculum](#)

[Rella Black History Foundation: #ShareTheirStory | Videos](#)



# The Human Library

Conversations around Equitable, Anti-Racist, &  
Anti-Oppressive Practice

**SHAYLE GRAHAM**

Hello colleagues and welcome to TDSB's Human Library: Conversations Around Equitable, Anti-Racist, and Anti-Oppressive Practice. We are your hosts Shayle Graham and Dr. Stephanie Fearon from the Equity, Anti-Racism, and Anti-Oppression Team. We have an insightful conversation in store for you today. Are you ready to talk courageously? Let's get into it. Hello, colleague community in this episode of TDSB Human Library, we are going to discuss African Canadian experiences and the curriculum with educator, historian, curriculum consultant, and the President of the Ontario Black History Society-- the one the only Natasha Henry. Before we dive in, can you take a moment just to share with us some of the passions that led you to do the work that you do.

**NATASHA HENRY**

My interest in Black history really started just leaving middle school and entering high school, I began to have questions around a Black presence in Toronto, and in Ontario, and in Canada. I was born and raised in Toronto, to parents from Jamaica. And I was, you know, quite aware of Black history in Jamaica, and had an appreciation for the Caribbean immigrant experience. But I found that there was a gap in my knowledge in terms of that history in Toronto. So that led me to do a lot of personal reading and writing and researching, attending a range of events to learn more.

As I mentioned, going to school in Toronto, while I did have the opportunity to learn about some Black history and read some Black authors, these were all African American focused. And so for me, you know, I found that obtaining this information helped me to gain a better sense, and to orient myself in the spaces of Toronto, and understand, you know, what it meant for me to be born in Canada. Then, when I learned that I could continue pursuing this knowledge by earning a degree in African Studies at York University, I did that. And I did a joint degree with the Faculty of Education at York. And when I became an educator, I knew that I didn't want my students, Black students in my care, to go through the same journey that I did. I felt an obligation to bring this instruction into the classroom to benefit Black students and all of my students to present and better represent Black Canadian experiences in my curricular instruction. And so that led me to develop learning materials from my classroom, and then it would go on to share these with friends and colleagues. And then that led into the work that I continue to do today in curriculum development.

**SHAYLE GRAHAM**

You know, Natasha, as I was conducting some research on you, it was quite evident that you specialize in the development of learning materials that focus on the African diasporic experience. Why do you think it is important for educators to learn about African diasporic histories in the 2021 classroom?

**NATASHA HENRY**

We are here in just going into 2021 coming off of a spring and summer of global social unrest, uprising, people in support of Black Lives Matter, people calling and demanding for governments and institutions to address systemic racism, broadly, and anti-Black racism specifically. And all of this is connected in terms of the role that education plays in perpetuating anti-Black racism, perpetuating anti-Black sentiments, in society and in schools. And so then education has an equally important role to play in disrupting and minimizing prejudice, stereotypes, anti-Blackness, in schools. And so we need to do this in a critical way to represent Black Canadian experiences and African experiences in our classrooms, and in all of our school spaces in a very critical way through an anti-racist pedagogy.

**NATASHA HENRY**

Again, recognizing the importance of creating learning opportunities that affirm, positively affirm Black identities and African identities and as well for non Black students to disrupt the development of anti-Black views and sentiments. It's important for educators to learn about that so that they are equipped in their classroom instruction, and that they are presenting, and are able to present Black history in a way that acknowledges contributions and achievements, but also accurately presents the ongoing contributions of struggles for racial equity that Black Canadians have in the past and continue to fight for.

**SHAYLE GRAHAM**

Thank you, thank you, thank you for making that connection between the past experiences of African Canadians and present-day experiences. You know, in our line of work as Equity Coaches, we often hear statements like this information is great, but how do I connect it to the curriculum? You know, this is an additional thing that I need to do that I really don't have the time for. So I'm interested, I'm interested to hear your take on this, Natasha, since you are leading the Ontario Black History society in demanding for the inclusions of Black history and experiences in the K to 12 curriculum. So my question to you is, what steps would you recommend educators take to ensure that students are learning about Black histories and experiences in today's virtual and face to face classroom so that it's not an add on?

**NATASHA HENRY**

Last October, the Ontario Black History society launched our campaign, "Blacked out History", to reignite the long-standing call from the Black community to have mandated learning expectations in the curriculum, Black history. But while this is an important endeavor, we need to continue to pursue this, but we need not wait for mandated learning expectations to integrate the histories and the experiences of people of African descent into the classroom. It's important that this is done throughout the year, and including in February Black History Month, which we are embarking on today. And recognizing that it's important whether we are doing remote learning due to COVID or if we're face to face. If we are committed to Equity, if we are committed to addressing anti-Black racism, if we are committed to better serving Black students, that this must be a priority, whatever the conditions may be. So I would recommend that educators use the opportunity, the great opportunity of Black History Month.

There are going to be so many events and learning opportunities for them to use on in their classroom. There are a range of digital resources that they can bring into the classroom. But again, it should not be limited to just the month of February that Black history should be taught throughout the year. And there are a range of resources that you can use in order to do so. One great model is the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) project the 365 Black Canadian curriculum, and that is a great way to support educators into integrating Black History into the classroom all throughout the year. This should also be done not just in the history and social studies classrooms, but in all disciplines in all subject areas that we need to see a representation of people of African descent. We need to also see Black and African ways of knowing and being and doing and decentering Eurocentric norms and Eurocentric ways of knowing and being and doing and that's an important element of anti-racist pedagogy in our classrooms.

**SHAYLE GRAHAM**

Once again, I have to thank you for that insight. I could stay engaged in this conversation all day. I most definitely know that you can too. But unfortunately, we're out of time and we have to wrap this up. So Natasha, before you go, would you be so kind to leave us with just some takeaways to help us further build our toolkits. Can you recommend three resources and/or supports for educators who are interested in including the histories of African Canadian communities in their programming and instruction?

**NATASHA HENRY**

There are tons and tons of resources that educators can use to help integrate Black and African histories and experiences into the classroom. I mentioned the ETFO 365 Black Canadian curriculum. There's this great 15 book collection "The Sankofa Black Heritage Collection" published by Rubicon, that's an anthology. So there's a range of texts that you can bring into your classroom. The Canada Post Black History Month stamps are great. Again, entry points into investigation and inquiry to a lot of stories. Recently, there were a couple of primary level books, more accessible books that I would recommend. One is "Trail Blazers", the Black pioneers who have shaped Canada. That's a great book. And then there's the Big Dreamers series that has two volumes. Again, these are great resources to bring into the classroom.

The Ontario Black History society, we've just recently updated our website. And we've included on there a number of resources that we've developed, but also resources from other places as well. One of the great resources we recently developed in partnership with the Rella Braithwaite Foundation and Ryerson University was a series of four video profiles animated stories of Black Canadians, and it's called share their story. So that's great way to bring in some stories into the classroom. The National Film Board has a number of documentaries that you can use. And there are some animated films that are making stories accessible to younger students, as well.

There are many picture books that have been published by, for example, Nadia Hohn and Shauntay Grant. There are several picture books, and those are just a name two, that we can use picture books, again as an entry point, to learn more about Black Canadian history. And then I have my personal website that I've developed where I've compiled materials from a range of organizations and sources that highlight Black Canadian history. My website is called teaching African Canadian history. And so if you Google that, you'll be able to find my website there. And again, these are just some of the many resources available for educators to do the important work of representing, recognizing, integrating, sharing the rich, diverse history of African peoples here in Canada.

**SHAYLE GRAHAM**

And that brings us to the end of our conversation, such a positive note to end off on. To our colleague community out there who are listening, I hope you all were taking notes. Natasha, on behalf of the Equity, Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression Team, we would like to thank you for stopping by and for chatting with us just a little bit about the importance of acknowledging African Canadian history, including it in curriculum, and sharing some ways on how educators can best go about implementing it in programming and instruction.

**NATASHA HENRY**

Thanks for having me.

**SHAYLE GRAHAM**

Okay, colleagues, that's all for today. We look forward to you joining us for our next courageous conversation. If you liked this episode, don't forget to share it with a colleague and post it on social media using the hashtag #TDSBtalks. Bye for now.