

## **everywoman Changemakers Podcast: Lavinya Stennett**

Is Black History just for October? Meet the woman challenging the UK Schools curriculum to change

Anna ([00:06](#)):

Progress. It's in the actions we take right now and in daring to think differently. Each one of us can do something to change things for the better right where we are now, and a thousand small things done with intent adds up to real change. For some people, that initial spark becomes a fire. Welcome to the everywoman:Changemakers podcast. I'm Anna, your host, and every month I'll be talking to inspiring leaders and activists. We're changing outlooks, challenging perceptions, and making a difference in the worlds of inclusion, business, the environment, sport, travel, and more. We'll be discussing their work, motivations, and vision, and most importantly, how revolution of one can lead to a positive, powerful change for the many. Today we're talking to Lavinya Stennett, founder of The Black Curriculum, a social enterprise that challenges the lack of black British history in the UK education curriculum across all subjects, providing teacher training and campaigning for change. This perspective shift of who and what gets taught and how, she says, is crucial to really understanding our cultural history and identity. So, welcome Lavinya.

Lavinya Stennett ([01:13](#)):

Thank you.

Anna ([01:14](#)):

When did you realise that this implicit racial bias was within the curriculum and how did it affect your perspective on history?

Lavinya Stennett ([01:22](#)):

I think I've always been aware that we're not really getting the full entirety of our history. When I think back to primary school, I remember there was one lesson that I went into and they were saying that we need to do homework that was going to be around black inventors and pioneers. That was one of the first times that I felt that I could use a lot of the material that my mom bought for me at home. We had these books that were just on African-American inventors and it was great because that was the only place that I got at such a young age. I think I was year two or year three ... yeah, probably year three, to get that information across. And I think the whole schooling throughout primary school and secondary school really never touched on Black History in a way that I felt was indicative of the things I knew and got at home.

Lavinya Stennett ([02:15](#)):

And so I think I've always had this awareness that we're not getting the full picture in terms of actually seeing that connection come to life in the curriculum in a way that connects to the structures that we have in the UK. It came alive to me in New Zealand and that was a very visceral experience because it

showed me that there is just so much of a connection between what we learn and how our society operates. I think that's where it really clicked for me.

Anna ([02:43](#)):

I mean that is a really interesting insight into how and what is taught and where. I mean, you talk about the fact that you had to learn black British history at home, because if you looked for it in the mainstream curriculum it wasn't there, was it? You weren't in any way seeing any representation other than history, which it could be argued is a story that's written by the privileged.

Lavinia Stennett ([03:09](#)):

Pretty much. I thought the kind of examples that you get at home are a lot more rooted in reality as well. So my first experience in school was black Americans. I am a British-born Jamaican and so a lot of the examples that I was getting even in school were very distant from the context that I'm rooted in. I felt like, again, that is something that is important to consider when we're thinking about Black History from homeschooling to actually the curriculum as well.

Anna ([03:39](#)):

20 years ago, the Macpherson report showed that culture diversity within the curriculum is one of the ways to prevent racism. Similarly, the Windrush review has recommended that colonial and migration history should be taught in schools. So why has it taken so long to even approach this? Why do you think it's still something that is not totally embedded in the UK curriculum? What's the sticking point?

Lavinia Stennett ([04:02](#)):

It's a really good question. 20 years ago I was four. I think back to that point, and I don't think it's any challenge for the UK to really think about what diversity can look like and to diversity in the sense of bringing in the experiences and the perspectives of those who have gone through events in history. I think my grandma has been here since 1950. I know there's previous generations who've been here before that as well. And so when I think just 20 years ago, that was a recommendation, it's like, how can we ignore not only the contributions but also the lives and also the toil from assertion also, economic perspective of those who have been here. So I think the reason it's taken so long is because there's a lack of urgency and impetus on behalf of those in education.

Lavinia Stennett ([04:58](#)):

When I say education, I mean education policy, and also government ministers thinking about actioning this. Because there's been campaigners since the 70s saying that we need to have Black History and we need to help young people understand their identity. There's been so many different kind of projects that have happened in protests. And so I think the discord between civil society and education policy is one of the largest things. But also more broadly, the institutional racism that persists if we keep ignoring these things. It only plays back into that whole idea that the government is just insensitive to reality and the issues that many people on the ground like my grandma have faced and go through.

Anna ([05:47](#)):

Do you think that there is in the UK, that part of it is an unwillingness in some ways to look honestly at things like the country's colonial history and the expectations, perceptions, and the structural racism that has actually been born from that and is still being worked through the system.

Lavinya Stennett ([06:06](#)):

Yeah, I have seen that there is a reluctance on part of our society to really understand the ills of colonialism and its borders context. Not only it was written once, really powerful nation that colonised half the world, but even beyond that, what that actually meant for people who experienced it. And I think it's not amnesia because we remember it really well. We claim it in a lot of our flags and the kind of sentiment that is driven particularly around the monarchy. We remember these really rich parts of our history that are basically used to benefit the narrative of Britain being this very strong power in the world.

Lavinya Stennett ([06:57](#)):

So I wouldn't say it's a historical amnesia. I just think it's a reluctance to see Britain playing a part in destroying and pillaging in the cultures. I don't think that's the part that is hard to access. I think it's that, well, the remnants haven't actually gone away, they're here, and it's, well, what do we do with that? So I think it's more of a moral question about how we deal with the legacies of that. So I don't say, I don't think, it's amnesia at all. I think we see it. It's as clear as day, but it's just a difficult situation to deal with.

Anna ([07:33](#)):

As you said at the beginning, it's about who and what gets taught and then how that gets framed in the collective consciousness of a country. I mean, it's interesting, we've talked about the Windrush review too. It's been recommended that should be taught in schools as history, but actually to do that then raises very serious questions about, for example, how the Windrush generation have been treated recently and continue to be. They're never things you teach out of context, are they?

Lavinya Stennett ([08:00](#)):

No. I think especially with Windrush. It's one of those ongoing issues because it's still happening today. That can be righted with the fact that a lot of people have seen the impact of Windrush happen over the last couple of years. It's still a situation where again, it comes back to colonialism and we can't ignore that there is still that relationship between the UK and Jamaica that's a very contentious relationship that is, I would argue, is very neo-colonial. And so again, that is part of this nexus that I think means a little bit more exploration and people don't know how to deal with that. We just see the end of the story, not the full picture. I think if you were told the full picture, then people would actually understand how to piece things together and hold people accountable and et cetera.

Anna ([08:56](#)):

I want to come back to something you mentioned right at the beginning. You talked about having spent some time in New Zealand. I was going to ask you because I know that you studied abroad in Aotearoa. From what I read, you were very interested in the way that indigenous and colonial history was sort of part of the everyday, made accessible to everyone of all ages. I was going to say, do any countries get this education inclusivity right and they obviously do. So tell me a little bit more about that firsthand experience that you've had. Crucially, what do these countries do that the UK doesn't do?

Lavinia Stennett ([09:27](#)):

I personally would say that during my studies in Aotearoa, it was so exciting. It was very new. I think, again, when you're going into a new place, you start to compare it to where you've come from. And so I think for me, it was very, again, alive. The education was alive and it was all based on Maori land as well, which again has a really strong significance because everything that we'd done was connected back to the land and making use of that. In a very physical way as well, so the learning wasn't just on paper and or in just sitting in a lecture. I was doing the kapa haka and that's dance. Then, you also connect to the outdoors. I think it was a very alive and tangible experience.

Lavinia Stennett ([10:14](#)):

I think in terms of the question around getting it right, New Zealand considers themselves as a bi-cultural nation. So that includes indigenous mores as well as white people. I think because of that recognition, there is more of impetus for them to teach and acknowledge and also respect not only Maori land but also the presence and the significance of their history in the curriculum. I think in the UK, this context is a lot different, particularly because it's almost subverting what happened in New Zealand and that our historical experience was off the shores of Britain. So we're not on the same kind of land and I don't think, again, we would have a bi-cultural recognition because that's not what has happened historically here. We have gone through the transatlantic slave trade that was orchestrated by the British on islands that were used economically to benefit Britain.

Lavinia Stennett ([11:21](#)):

And so we've ended up coming back full circle, or full triangle if you like, to this country. Within that, it is very difficult for us to be recognised in that sense, in that triangle, if there isn't that complete understanding of what Britain actually done as a colonial power. So again, it's like a missing piece of the puzzle. The recognition has to come before the curriculum. It's very easy for the government and it's very easy for colonial apologists to say that we shouldn't be teaching Black History, we shouldn't be teaching diversity, multiculturalism, just because that recognition isn't there. So I think, again, to push the conversation forward, it needs to be more accepted on a social and a broader kind of level across society because that's what I saw in New Zealand. No one's saying that this isn't Maori land. Everyone knows it is and that's a fact. Whether or not that makes you feel uncomfortable, it's just the fact.

Lavinia Stennett ([12:18](#)):

We don't have that here and so a lot of the learning as well also happens in the classroom. When you think about those classrooms, it's usually university. It's not the classrooms where young people are in. So again, it's like you have to pay a lot of money, go into very kind of elitist circles to actually understand the full picture and the whole intention of the Black curriculums to make sure that it's on a national and broader social level. I think again, that needs to happen in the UK.

Anna ([12:48](#)):

Such an interesting point. You're right, exactly. There's a lot of gate-keeping before you get to see the full picture, isn't there? So, talk to me, in terms of The Black Curriculum and the work you do, where, when do you see the best time to start? Presumably, it's age 4 and 5, it's early, it's normalising, and it's creating that accessibility and allowing at such an early age, all of the voices to be heard, not just one voice.

Lavinya Stennett ([13:13](#)):

And the time is now, I think. Often we wait until October or just a good time. I think just, again, the way that we do things, it's like we categorise time and we categorise places and it's all done in a way where an intentional kind of placing of getting things perfect. I think, there's never a wrong time to teach a young person what's right and what's wrong. The minute that you see them doing something that isn't right is the time to tell them that it's wrong, and vice versa as well. So I think, children are a lot smarter and they would appreciate what I would have appreciated. I'm sure my niece and my family members would, to get a full rounded education from early.

Lavinya Stennett ([14:01](#)):

I'm not saying that that has to just be about colonialism. It can be about Black people in Tudor times. It could be simply about Black hair. So again, narratives that not just are focused on one specific time or thing, but thinking again more broadly about the different experiences and events and contributions, life stories, that are weaved throughout the entire curriculum and across different subjects as well. I think people do instantly get scared like, "Oh, I don't want to talk about slavery to my three-year-old." But I'm not saying you have to. Number one, it's not by force. I think, secondly, there's different parts of that narrative that you can share and weave in very carefully. My point is that there isn't ever a wrong time to do it and we shouldn't box ourselves in to think that this is the only thing that we can teach and it has to be depressing and hard.

Anna ([14:59](#)):

Well, I was going to say, I mean, the Black experience, like you said, it's sort of slightly reduced, isn't it, to sort of slavery and segregation and colonialism. But actually the Black experience also includes Black scientists, Black poets. Like you say, Black people throughout all epochs of history doing amazing things. So again, it's obviously a vital thing to teach, but not allowing the voices to be multi-various is also a sort of form of gatekeepers, isn't it?

Lavinya Stennett ([15:30](#)):

Oh, absolutely. It was really interesting to read *Decolonizing Methodologies*. That was one of the first books I read when I was in New Zealand by Linda Tuhiwai Smith. She thinks about conceptions of time and place, and also how linear and very limiting, I guess, a lot of the things that we place on ourselves are. And when I think about the curriculum and how it's even structured, it's quite like it's not only quite linear, but it's very hard to think about in a broader sense that can really be enriching because it's segmented in a way that separates geography from science and history from English. When you think about the way that we live life, it's all kind of seamless and it's melted together. I think, again, that we don't experience one thing at a time. So to be able to teach something like that through the lens of Black History, it has to be broad. So in some ways, it's like the curriculum in and of itself is a limitation to what we're really trying to do here, but we've got to start somewhere.

Lavinya Stennett ([16:36](#)):

Yes, to come back to the point around scientists, especially with STEM subjects. I think there again, it's like, well, where do we start? If we didn't have the curriculum as a starting point to think about what to put into STEM, we could start to draw theories that originated in the continent of Africa around science and around astronomy; also, medical science as well. There's so much different types of learnings that



are available, but because of the structures that we have, it's very difficult to place them in a way that we can connect them all and learn about everything.

Anna ([17:12](#)):

Nothing short of a radical overhaul is needed. I mean, obviously you're one of the people leading the charge on that. So when did you first come up with the idea for The Black Curriculum and how did you make it take off? Do you get a lot of positive propulsion forward or did you get any pushback?

Lavinia Stennett ([17:27](#)):

It started when I was in New Zealand. I think it was in a lecture. I think it was during my first or second month there and I was just going into lots lectures and I had this idea of creating a timeline that was going to compare the experiences of Black people to Maoris. I was like, "Nah. What's the timeline going to do?" It's not going to do nothing. It needs to be for everyone. So yeah, basically I put the idea into a grant and we won. I won at the time. Then, I bought in people that I was studying with at SOAS when I went back to the UK. I met Lisa Kennedy and Bethany Thompson who helped develop not the idea, develop the infrastructure, so The Black Curriculum so could actually develop.

Lavinia Stennett ([18:12](#)):

We brought on freelancers in the beginning, probably about 10. They created this curriculum of 12 topics. And we just started cold-calling school and that was really interesting. There was a few teachers who were like, "Yeah, not really," "Yeah, we don't really need it" or "It's not going to work." But at the same time, there was such an appetite from the teachers that did want it and they were super keen and bought us instantly. I mean, I came back from New Zealand, 2018 around October, and then by April, we'd finished the curriculum. That September, 2019, we were already in three schools teaching it. It was that really good and the appetite has obviously only grown since, particularly post Black Lives Matter last year as well. So yeah, it's just gone from strength to strength.

Anna ([19:03](#)):

It's October, it's Black History month. Is it a good thing to have Black History month or is it a dangerous thing? I mean, given what you said about the amount of change at many levels that needs to happen, sometimes there's an argument that awareness weeks, months, days allows people to sort of tick boxes and relegates it to sort of a, and we do Black History in October. What's your feeling on the whole thing?

Lavinia Stennett ([19:30](#)):

If this was me last year, I would've said, "No, get rid of this. It doesn't make sense." However, I see both sides. I think that's the beauty of not only awareness because we have great shows that happen in October that educate. To me that Lindsay Lancashire and outside of Black History month, that information would be available to him. And I think it's really important that the month does serve a purpose for people who just don't really know where to start.

Lavinia Stennett ([19:59](#)):

However, I do see the limitations. I think, again, when we're thinking about as a month to categorise one history, it just isn't enough. I can't even get the curriculum in a month, all throughout the curriculum, that could not happen in Black History month alone. It's just in that sense, quite redundant, but I think

as a starting point, maybe the people who originally set out for Black History month to be taught, I'm sure they didn't want everything taught in the month, but that's what it's turned into. So I think, making it clear that there's more to do, I think it depends on what we do with the month, the intention of those who also receive information of Black History month, what they then go and do with the information and learning as well.

Anna ([20:43](#)):

In the end, I imagine that what you'd like to see is that the curriculum, that Black History is just a natural part of the curriculum. It's not sort of put in this, a month or when now we're doing Black History lessons. It's just the experience that we're learning of our country, of the world, of the way that things have developed, and how they need to move forward. In terms of the effects of that more inclusive curriculum, on wider society and on young people's sort of aspirations, their sense of personal identity, I think particularly, as a black British person, what kind of sense of identity, how would it be impacted to have that inclusive curriculum?

Lavinia Stennett ([21:25](#)):

Well, I'll start with the current narratives that exist and the impact of that. So you're in school as a young black person, probably year eight ... no, not year eight, you're eight years old and the first thing that you see on your board is you are a slave and we're going to watch this film called Roots. Not only are you embarrassed, but you're also gaslighted into thinking that that's where your history starts and stops, and your contributions to society are not really that valued.

Lavinia Stennett ([21:56](#)):

Secondly, outside of the school, when we're thinking about representations in the media and what Black people are often depicted as doing and being from film to TV, that is only going to reinforce what you're learning in school as well. I think if you are learning a curriculum in school that is empowering and gives you the confidence, not only are you able to have the agency to say, "Well, no, that's not really me. That doesn't represent me. I know who I am," that also empowers you with confidence. It gives you the confidence that's inside of yourself, that gives you the ability to then not only advocate for yourself, but go out and set yourself out to do things that haven't been done before, or maybe have been done before but you're going to do it even better.

Lavinia Stennett ([22:43](#)):

When we're thinking about empowering, it's much more than just a nice feeling. It's actual skills for the world and for white people, for people who are not black. Again, it gives you that sense of understanding and empathy, and those are also very important skills. As a nation, we really need to become a lot more emotionally intelligent and support each other. This is not just for black people. This is for everybody. And I think if we can really exercise those skills, we're giving everyone the tools to be able to live in a safe way, in a respectful way. We can have disagreements, however. No one is being discriminated upon by the basis of their colour. I think it's for everybody and it gives everyone confidence and ability to understand which is amazing.

Anna ([23:34](#)):

And a collective history that is an intelligent history actually, and not, as you say, not a segmented or slightly pushed under the carpet history. It seems like such an obvious solution and we've talked about the reasons why perhaps it's not moving as fast as it should be. But my final question to you is, what is the change that you want to see? I mean, we've talked around it, but if you had your way, what would you see and how long do you think realistically it's going to take to get there?

Lavinia Stennett ([24:08](#)):

The ultimate vision is one where all young people in the UK are empowered with a sense of belonging and identity. Belonging in their communities, belonging in every establishment, and belonging in themselves as well. I think that is connected to the identity where they can freely express themselves, share good moments, bad moments with everyone, and there is unity in the community. So I think that is the ultimate vision where every young person realises and releases that full potential in themselves. So that's the ultimate goal.

Lavinia Stennett ([24:41](#)):

For us to be able to get there, I think number one milestone is that school curriculums and exam board specifications enable narratives that are a lot more broader to be present within their specifications and subjects that are being taught as well. That's the same for books. Then secondly, we have been petitioning, which is the whole idea of our campaign TBH365, for the government to change national curriculum, which I think, again, is important. However, it's not the end goal. The recognition is just key and will enable a lot more teachers to feel confident that they've got some examples there and they can do it. So I think those are the two main ones. I think furthermore, when it comes down to it, we need teachers to have the language, the tools, the confidence to do this, to teach this, and parents as well. So it's, again, it's everyone across society, but for the benefit of young people to get to the ultimate vision.

Anna ([25:42](#)):

Actually, I'm going to ask you one final question. If you had to give a bit of advice to firstly, a teacher, listen to this, a parent and a pupil about how to help you push this forward, what would you say to them?

Lavinia Stennett ([25:58](#)):

I'd say for teachers, do not be afraid of pushback. There are repercussions socially, not only from the school environment, but also more broadly outside of that, because I know there's a lot of narratives at the moment that say you can't do this and you can't. It's absolutely possible. The reason why it's possible is because it's needed and young people are looking to you for that. So I would say, be confident and don't fear the repercussions of teaching Black History.

Lavinia Stennett ([26:27](#)):

And for a parent, I'd say, explore as much as you can. Get outside. Find really creative ways of engaging young people besides books. Books are a great start. I think coming back to that experience of tangibly experiencing what it means to be in a country that we have a collective history, it's important that young people can make the identification outside as well as inside the classroom. So try and be creative and get outside and explore as much as possible.





Anna ([26:54](#)):

And for a pupil?

Lavinia Stennett ([26:54](#)):

And for a pupil, I have to say, research, just keep going. You have books, you have podcasts, you have films now that are dedicated to teaching Black History. So research as much as you can and share that. I think our ideas are as great and as much as they are shared. Think once you've done your research, make sure that you are placing that pressure on teachers to make sure that that happens because your voice is important. And ultimately, I'm just going to say, you run things. Students: Use your power.

Anna ([27:30](#)):

Lavinia Stennett, thank you so much for joining us today.

Lavinia Stennett ([27:33](#)):

Thank you.

Anna ([27:38](#)):

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