

Learning and Growing Together

Using Texts to Navigate Conversations in Our Classrooms

The Halifax EXPLOSION

6 DECEMBER 1917, AT 9:05 IN THE MORNING

A poem by Halifax's seventh poet laureate

AFUA COOPER

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY REBECCA BENDER

The Halifax Explosion is a poem written by Halifax's seventh poet laureate, Dr. Afua Cooper. It reveals dramatically what happened on 6 December 1917 at 9:05 AM when two ships carrying munitions and war supplies collided in the Halifax Harbour. The poem shows the tragic toll the resulting explosion and fire took on the residents of Halifax and the surrounding area, which stretched all the way north to Africville. Dr. Cooper commemorates the Halifax Explosion through verse and highlights the experiences of the Black Haligonians in this disaster. Her powerful words are magnified in this book with dramatic historical photographs and poignant art.



SANKOFA



**Learning and Growing Together: Using Texts to Navigate Conversations
in Our Classrooms: *The Halifax Explosion***

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This teacher's guide accompanies *The Halifax Explosion* written by Afua Cooper and illustrated by Rebecca Bender. *The Halifax Explosion* presents a text with rich connections across subject areas. It is designed to engage students in meaningful conversations with a supportive approach.

Social and cultural diversity is a resource for expanding and enriching the learning experiences of all students. Students can learn so much from the diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of their classmates in a community of learners where participants discuss and explore their own and others' customs, histories, traditions, beliefs, and ways of making sense of the world. In reading, viewing, and discussing a variety of texts, students from different backgrounds can come to understand each others' perspectives, to realize that their ways of seeing and knowing are not the only ones possible, and to probe the complexity of the idea and issues they are examining.

— Valuing Social and Cultural Diversity,
Atlantic Canada English Language Arts
(Nova Scotia 1998, p. 5)

The guide is divided into three sections. The first section begins with concepts and guiding questions aligned with outcomes in English language arts, and social studies by grade level, followed by suggested book discussion questions and a section on learning experiences.

Integrating Outcomes

In each curriculum area, there are outcomes with related concepts and skills that require discrete allotment of instructional time. However, there are many outcomes that may be integrated effectively with those from multiple subject areas. It is recognized that different grade-level configurations and different school configurations may exist, and therefore, may require some flexibility in planning for instruction. (Nova Scotia 2016)

For example, in combined classrooms you will find outcomes that are aligned. In grades 5 and 6, students can learn about diversity and perspectives, and by 7th grade they can delve deeper into understanding perspectives.

Dr. Afua Cooper's poem, *The Halifax Explosion*, centered on the experiences of some African Nova Scotians in Africville, attempts to share this history and help people remember. Africville, a community of Black Nova Scotians, was located on the outskirts of Halifax. It was widely believed to have been left untouched by the explosion. Since the damage was never recorded, the rest of the world did not learn how the residents of Africville suffered from the explosion. However, this was not the case. (*The Halifax Explosion*, pages 34 and 35).

Holding space to include stories of people often left out of history and opening new perspectives using literature creates a rich learning experience for all students. The inclusion of various perspectives and voices using a historical lens is not only integral to students' historical understanding but helps students to understand situations from other points of view, beliefs, experiences, etc., reducing bias.

Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7
Learners will respond personally and critically to a range of culturally diverse texts.	Learners will respond personally and critically to a range of culturally diverse texts.	Learners will comprehend a range of communication forms using listening strategies, reading strategies, and viewing strategies.
Concept: Diversity	Concept: Diversity	Concept: Perspective
Why is it important to read books which present the perspectives of a variety of cultures and peoples?	Why is it important to read books which present the perspectives of a variety of cultures and peoples?	How do my experiences influence how I understand what I hear, read, or view? Why is it important to consider a range of ideas and perspectives?

Introduction

Telling the stories of the Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotians, two sometimes ignored communities of Nova Scotia, is one way to educate the public on the important, yet often overlooked, history of the Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotians.

– *The Halifax Explosion* (Cooper 2023, 34)

The job of historians is to use evidence to present a clear understanding of the past. In the case of famous historic events, like the Halifax Explosion, it can be tempting to believe that all the evidence has been uncovered and the experiences of the event are widely understood. *The Halifax Explosion: 6 December 1917, at 9:05 in the Morning* encourages readers to pause and reflect on that belief by leaving us with the question: “Does Halifax remember?”

Traditionally, texts about the Halifax Explosion have not included the experiences of the Black residents of Halifax. These omissions present an incomplete picture of the impacts of the Halifax Explosion—they ignore the loss and heroism of Black individuals and families, and the anti-Black racism residents continued to experience in the wake of the Explosion. Dr. Cooper’s poem brings to light the stories of the Explosion held within the Black community of Halifax.

As educators, we value and affirm the experiences of the Black community when we share them with students. Sharing these stories benefits all students by encouraging them to consider how including all voices helps us to better understand our shared history.

Teacher Reflection:

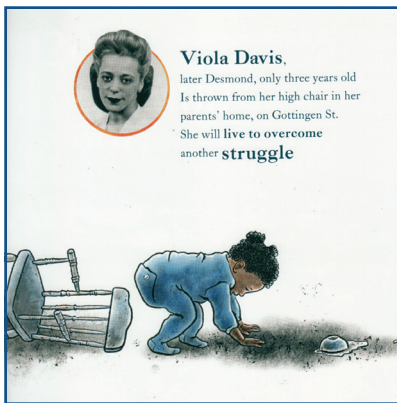
After reading *The Halifax Explosion* by Dr. Afua Cooper, did you have an emotional response to the text? What are you feeling? How might reading from multiple perspectives help you grow in navigating conversations in the classroom and cross-cultural understanding? How might texts including Black experiences help you be more inclusive and promote cross-cultural understanding in the classroom?

Section 1: Concepts

There are many concepts to explore in *The Halifax Explosion*. Teachers can initiate discussions by asking **who, what, why, when, where**, and **how** to gain a deeper understanding of the text that extends beyond the words on the page.

The Halifax Explosion inspires questions about:

- construction of history/discovery of history
- coping with grief and loss
- cross-cultural understanding
- diversity
- impact on communities
- racism
- remembrance
- stereotypes/stereotyping
- voices and perspectives
- word choice and language use



Grade 5

Within the African Nova Scotian community, oral history and oral tradition have preserved stories of resilience and survival for generations. They are important sources of historical information because for many years, the experiences of the Black community were not always included in written documentation. The history of the Black communities of Halifax are kept alive in oral history and oral tradition, and this information has allowed for a deeper understanding of the Halifax Explosion and its impacts on the residents.

OUTCOME

Social Studies 5:

Learners will **investigate** how we learn about the past, with a focus on Acadians, African Nova Scotians, Gaels, Mi'kmaq, and additional cultures.

Construction of History/Discovery of History

Guiding Question (*Social Studies P-6: At-a-Glance*, p. 22)

- History is often constructed through the discovery and interpretation of primary sources and oral histories. What do primary sources, including oral histories, tell us about the history of a place and/or people?

Word Choice and Language Use

Guiding Questions (*English Language Arts P-6: At-a-Glance*, p. 54)

- Why is language choice important?
- How does the author's choice of words impact the reader?
- How can word choice engage or disengage your audience?

Diversity

Guiding Questions *(English Language Arts: P-6: At-a-Glance, p. 57)*

- Why is it important to read books that present the perspectives of a variety of cultures and peoples?

What is stereotyping, bias, and prejudice?

- How are stereotyping, bias, and prejudice different?
- How can I identify stereotyping, bias, and prejudice in texts?

bias: a strong feeling in favour of or against one group of people, or one side in an argument, often not based on fair judgement *(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary)*

prejudice: an unreasonable dislike of or preference for a person, group, custom, etc., especially when it is based on their race, religion, sex, etc. *(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary)*

stereotype: a fixed idea or image that many people have of a particular type of person or thing, but which is often not true in reality and may cause hurt and offence *(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary)*

Additional grade 5 learning experiences can be found in Section 3.

OUTCOME

English Language Arts 5: Learners will **respond** personally and critically to a range of culturally diverse texts.

Grade 6

Diversity

OUTCOME

English Language Arts 6:

Learners will **respond** personally and critically to a range of culturally diverse texts.

Guiding Questions (*English Language Arts P-6: At-a-Glance*, p. 67)

- What is stereotyping, bias, and prejudice?
- How are stereotyping, bias, and prejudice different?
- How can I identify stereotyping, bias, and prejudice in texts?

bias: a strong feeling in favour of or against one group of people, or one side in an argument, often not based on fair judgement (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*)

prejudice: an unreasonable dislike of or preference for a person, group, custom, etc., especially when it is based on their race, religion, sex, etc. (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*)

stereotype: a fixed idea or image that many people have of a particular type of person or thing, but which is often not true in reality and may cause hurt and offence (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*)

Stereotypes/Stereotyping

OUTCOME

Social Studies 6:

Learners will **analyse** the impact of cross-cultural understanding, inclusive of Acadians, African Nova Scotians, Gaels, Mi'kmaq, and additional cultures.

Guiding Questions (*Social Studies P-6: At-a-Glance*, p. 28)

- How can I understand the impact of stereotyping on cross-cultural understandings?

Cross-Cultural Understanding

Guiding Questions (*Social Studies P-6: At-a-Glance*, p. 28)

- What is the consequence of not having cross-cultural understanding?
- Why is it important to understand cultural perspectives?

Additional grade 6 learning experiences can be found in Section 3.

Grade 7

Voices and Perspectives

Guiding Question (*English Language Arts 7: At-a-Glance*, p.5)

- Why is it important to consider communication forms created by people from within the culture?

Speakers'/Writers'/Producers' Choices

Guiding Questions (*English Language Arts 7: At-a-Glance*, p.5)

- What choices does the speaker/writer/producer make in their cultural expression?
- How do the speakers'/writers'/producers' choices help me to understand their message?

Word Choice and Language Use

Guiding Question (*English Language Arts 7: At-a-Glance*, p. 11)

- How does language use (voice, word choice, and sentence style) influence communication?

Voices and Perspectives

Guiding Questions (*English Language Arts 7: At-a-Glance*, p. 13)

- Why is it important to consider a range of ideas and perspectives?
- How do ideas, perspectives, and information from the communication form influence my comprehension?

Impact on Communities

Guiding Question (modified) (*Social Studies 7: At-a-Glance*, p. 11)

- How did the Halifax Explosion impact African Nova Scotian communities?

Remembrance

Guiding Question (modified) (*Social Studies 7: At-a-Glance*, p. 11)

- How can we acknowledge the sacrifices resulting from the Halifax Explosion?

Additional grade 7 learning experiences can be found in Section 3.

OUTCOME

English Language Arts 7: Learners will **reflect** on how the cultures of communities, inclusive of the Mi'kmaq, Acadians, African Nova Scotians, and the Gaels, are expressed through a range of communication forms.

OUTCOME

English Language Arts 7: Learners will **implement** speaking and writing strategies for effective communication in relation to audience and purpose.

OUTCOME

English Language Arts 7: Learners will **comprehend** a range of communication forms using listening strategies, reading strategies, and viewing strategies.

OUTCOME

Social Studies 7: Learners will **evaluate** the impacts of World War I on the Maritimes.

Section 2: Read Aloud and Book Discussion

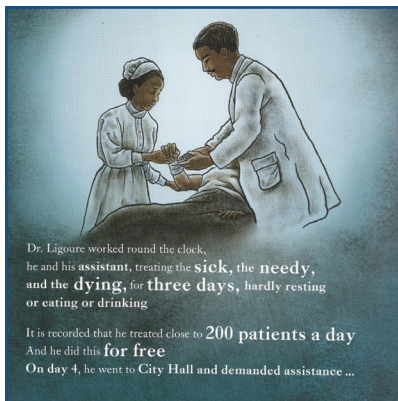
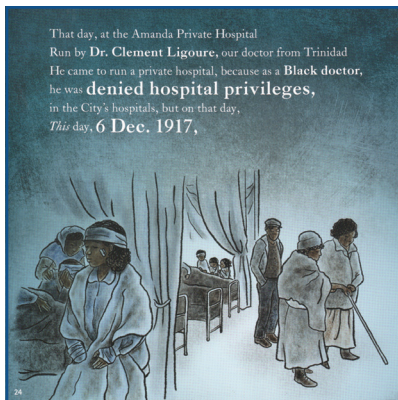
Read Aloud—What Is It?

A time when the teacher reads aloud to students, either in whole or small groups

A deliberate instructional context

An interactive learning opportunity

—*Teaching In Action: Grades 4–6*, p. 28



Students should have opportunities to use talk to communicate effectively and clearly, respecting cultural contexts, and to respond personally and critically to prompts or questions.

In terms of responding to students and wait time, it is important to not only wait following asking a question, but after a student responds to a question. When a student does not know the immediate answer, ask questions, and guide the students' thinking rather than moving on to the next student. When this happens, students are more likely to elaborate or support the answer given and other students are implicitly invited to chime in. Providing students with multiple ways to participate in discussing and responding is part of a responsive pedagogy.

Learners in the middle school years are beginning to think about the various health behaviours from a broader social justice perspective. This involves teaching difficult history. Difficult histories often elicit strong emotional reactions. They challenge widely accepted versions of a community or nation's past or stated values. Difficult histories connect with questions or problems facing us in the present and cause us to question our understanding of the past and present. Learners also continue to explore healthy ways to cope with mental health distress, mental health problems, and grief. This includes becoming aware that culture influences ways of coping with mental health. For example, African Nova Scotian communities and people have a history of drawing on the strength of community, religion, and spirituality. Coming together in times of grief and loss to find comfort and support is a healthy coping strategy.

Holding space for conversations from a broader social justice perspective and ways to cope with grief are important concepts for students at this developmental stage because they want to talk and think critically about how these concepts impact them and people around them. Therefore, it is essential to create a safe and inclusive learning environment for these kinds of conversations and for students to share their stories.

Coping Strategies

Guiding Questions (*Health Education 6: At-a-Glance*, p. 4)

- How can relationships (friendships, family, Elders, community, land) be helpful if you are grieving a loss?
- How does ceremony and rituals help with grief and loss?
- Additional guiding questions:
- How is helping others a strategy for coping with grief?
- How do people in your community come together to support each other?
- What are the gifts that you could contribute during a time of grief, loss, and uncertainty in your community?

Racism

While not explicitly introduced as a concept, the topic of racism is embedded throughout the grades 5 and 6 health education curriculum and grade 7 healthy living curriculum.

Guiding Questions

- What is racism?
- Can you identify examples from the book?
- How were people in the book impacted by racism?

OUTCOME

Health Education 6:
Learners will **investigate** the components of mental health literacy

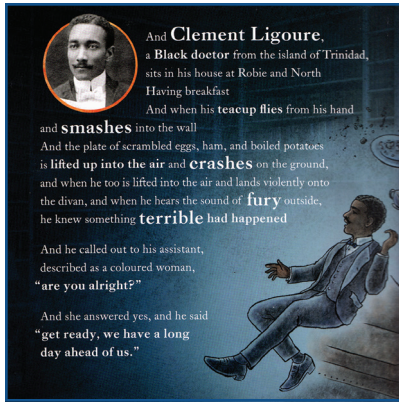
Page 19

“But Old Jim Crow raised his nasty head”

Example: When someone says, “Jim Crow raised his nasty head” it is referring to unfair rules and negative attitudes towards Black people, showing up again, as evidenced by the lack of support from the Disaster Relief Commission.

Section 3: Additional Learning Experiences

Grades 5, 6, and 7 (Language Arts)



1. Using the example of Clement Ligoure, a Black doctor from the island of Trinidad, discuss the definition of hero.

hero: a person who is admired by many people for doing something brave or good (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary)

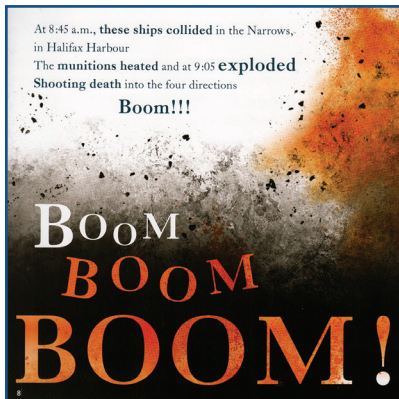
- What does it mean to be a hero?
- Why is it important to remember heroes?
- What roles do heroes play in society?



2. Show students pages 28 and 29, “Does Halifax remember? What might the author be trying to tell us by:

- choosing this photograph?
- presenting this image and text in this way?
- placing this image and text at this point in the book?

inferring: using evidence; the things we observe or that may be implied but not written in the text to construct meaning; often referred to as “reading between the lines”



Grades 5, 6, and 7 (Arts Integration)

1. Why do you think the author and the illustrator
 - decided to bold certain words?
 - changed the size of certain words?
 - used different colours for words?
2. Would it change your impressions of the story if the words on the page were all the same size and colour?
3. Look through the book and find all the words in orange and red. Do these words have a connection?
4. What are the main colours used in the book? Do these colours affect you in any way? Why or why not?
5. Why do you think the illustrator uses both photographs and drawn images throughout the book?

Grade 5 (Language Arts)

If time is spent teaching the elements of non-fiction poetry, *The Halifax Explosion* can be used as a mentor text to support students to write their own short non-fiction poems about a person of their choice.

1. Dr. Cooper uses poetry to inform readers about some of the African Nova Scotians impacted by the Halifax Explosion. Choose one person portrayed in the poem and discuss with a partner all that you've learned about that person from their inclusion in the poem.
 - Why do you think Dr. Cooper chose to represent specific people in the poem?
 - How does the inclusion of information about real people impact the reader?
2. Dr. Cooper chose non-fiction poetry to present information about Viola Davis, Clement Ligoure, Rose Hickey, Mrs. Brown, Mary and Levi Lucas, and the Andrews family. Choose a real person who is important to you and write down what you think is the most important things to know about them. Present the person you've chosen using a medium of your choice.

Grade 5 (Social Studies)

Construction of History

Historians use written documents, such as the records kept during the Halifax Explosion, to better understand how the event impacted people. They also use oral histories—knowledge passed down within communities about an event. *The Halifax Explosion* is an example of information that was gathered both from historical records, and from the oral histories of the Black communities of Halifax.

Guiding Question

- What do primary sources, including oral histories, tell us about the history of a place and/or a people?
1. Paraphrase the Historical Note (pp. 34–35) for the class, then read *The Halifax Explosion* to the class. Ask students to think about what they already know about the Halifax Explosion and to share their thoughts with the class.
 2. Ask students to think about how the individuals they read about were affected by the Halifax Explosion (e.g., Viola Davis, Clement Ligoure, Rose Hickey, Mrs. Brown, Mary and Levi Lucas, and the Andrews family).



Reflect:

- What did you learn about the experiences of Black residents?
- How did you feel as you learned about these experiences?
- Did anything you learn surprise you or upset you?

Research:

- Dr. Cooper noted that the Mi'kmaw community at Kepe'kek (Turtle Grove) was also impacted by the Halifax Explosion. Research to find out more about how the Mi'kmaq were impacted.

Act:

- How can your class use words and images to share your learning with others?

Grade 6 (Health Education, Language Arts, Social Studies)

Connected Concepts: Audience and Purpose, Cross-cultural Understanding, Critical and Personal Response, Racism

Read the front matter on page 5 of *The Halifax Explosion* to the class.

1. Based on the front matter, why do you believe that Dr. Cooper chose to write the poem *The Halifax Explosion*? Share your thoughts with a partner after the reading.

Read *The Halifax Explosion* to the class.

2. Authors write for a particular purpose. What examples do you hear that may be connected to Dr. Cooper's purpose in writing this book? Share your thoughts with a partner.

The Historical Note on page 34 states,

"Telling the stories of Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotians, two sometimes ignored communities of Nova Scotia, is one way to educate the public on the important, yet often overlooked, history of the Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotians. This poem, '*The Halifax Explosion*,' centred on the experiences of some African Nova Scotians in Africville, attempts to share this history and help people remember."

3. The Historical Note indicates that helping people remember was one purpose for writing the poem. Why is important to be aware of the impact of the Halifax Explosion on African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq communities?
4. How might the perspective from which a story is told, impact the reader? Talk about how we might know when information comes from a reliable source?

Grade 6 (Social Studies)

The Impact of Cross-cultural Understanding

Cross-cultural understanding is important to ensure we have an accurate understanding of past events. Traditionally, the experiences of people from racialized and marginalized communities were not included in the ways history was told. This meant that people often did not have a full or accurate picture of the past. *The Halifax Explosion* includes information about the Black experiences of the Explosion, which can help us to have a better understanding of the events that unfolded for all residents of Halifax.

Guiding Question (*Social Studies 6: At-a-Glance*, p.28)

- Why is it important to understand cultural perspectives?

Discuss:

Read *The Halifax Explosion* to the class. To support student conversations, you can introduce the information provided on page 34, which explains why Dr. Cooper wrote the book.

- How does what we learned from the poem compare to what we already knew?
- Are there new perspectives we can identify?
- How does new information grow our understanding of the Halifax Explosion?
- Why is it important to consider different perspectives when we learn about an event like the Halifax Explosion?

Research:

In partners, discuss how to find reliable information about the Black experiences of the Halifax Explosion (websites, community interviews, etc.).

- Locate and review additional information about Black experiences of the Halifax Explosion. Do you notice any patterns in how Black residents were treated at the time of the Explosion? (To support students in identifying patterns, you can explicitly teach terms like racism, discrimination, and resilience.)

Reflect:

- At the end of the book, Dr. Cooper asks readers, "Does Halifax remember?" Why is it important for all people to be remembered?
- Reflect on how you think that we should remember the Black experiences of the Halifax Explosion. Share your ideas with your classmates.

Grade 7 (Language Arts)

1. Dr. Cooper uses onomatopoeias and visual techniques, like bold and enlarged words, different fonts, photos, and illustrations, to make your reading of her poem dramatic so that you feel a part of the people's experiences of the Halifax Explosion.
 - How could you use different techniques to give the same experience to someone listening to the poem?
 - In a group, develop a dramatic presentation of the poem.
2. Dr. Cooper uses many specific details about the people in her poem to make us feel empathetic towards them.

Empathy is when you understand and share the feelings and experiences of another person. It's the ability to "put yourself in someone else's shoes" and feel what they might be feeling.

- Why do you think she felt it was important for her readers to feel empathy?
 - What details does she include to create empathy?
3. Research a historical event that interests you. Try to find specific examples and details you could use in retelling the story that would create empathy in your audience.
 - Using the examples and details you found, create a communication form (a poem, story, play, etc.) about the event to create empathy in your audience.
 - Present your creation to the class and explain how you used the details and examples to create empathy.
 4. One of the most powerful parts of Dr. Cooper's book is the images that accompany the words of the poem.
 - How do the images make an impact on the meaning of the words?
 - Research a historical event that interests you and find a poem that has been written about it, or write one yourself. Create a presentation or collage that uses images like photos or drawings to highlight the author's word choice in the poem. Explain why you chose each image to make the words more impactful.

Grade 7 (Social Studies)

The Halifax Explosion is significant for many reasons, including the sacrifices experienced and resilience displayed by so many residents. When studying the impacts of the Halifax Explosion, it is important to consider the various communities that were affected. By learning about the Black experiences of the Explosion, we better understand not only the sacrifices and contributions of Black residents, but also the systemic racism that Black residents experienced as they attempted to heal from their loss.

Remembrance

Guiding Question (*Renewed Social Studies 7: At-a-Glance*)

- How can we acknowledge the sacrifices of World War I?
1. Ask students to think about what they know about the Halifax Explosion. Lead a discussion asking students to consider: Whose stories are usually told? Whose stories are left out?

Read *The Halifax Explosion* to the class.

2. Identify examples of sacrifices the Black community made or experienced because of the Halifax Explosion.
3. Do further research into the impacts of the Halifax Explosion on various communities. (Students can refer to page 15 of “World War: Impact on the Maritimes” and the case study “World War I: The Halifax Explosion” found on the Social Studies 7 provincial eLearning site.)
4. In small groups, students can share their findings and discuss the following:
 - How can we acknowledge the sacrifices made during the Halifax Explosion?
 - What are some examples of the oppression residents faced and the resilience of the community.
5. Ask students to discuss how they might acknowledge the sacrifices of the residents during the Halifax Explosion. Develop a response and share it with others.

Resources

Africville Museum: <https://africvillemuseum.org>

"Africville National Historic Site":
<https://parks.canada.ca/culture/designation/lieu-site/africville>

"Africville" Search (Nova Scotia Archives):
<https://archives.novascotia.ca/search/?q=africville>

"Halifax Municipal Archives: Remembering Africville Source Guide":
<https://www.halifaxpubliclibraries.ca/blogs/post/halifax-municipal-archives-remembering-africville-source-guide>

Video:

"Africville: The Black community bulldozed by the city of Halifax"
<https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=africville&mid=029F657D13F518BD0B6D029F657D13F518BD0B6D>

Social Studies 7 Provincial eLearning Site:

<https://nsvs.ednet.ns.ca/nsps/mod/page/view.php?id=243906>

- **World War 1:** "World War I: Impact on the Maritimes" (page 15)
- **Case Studies:** "World War I: Impact on the Maritimes: The Halifax Explosion"

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