

Black Heroes of Mathematics Conference

Growing up, we read about heroes in science and mathematics whose breakthrough ideas led to innovations. Unnoticed by many is the fact that very few of these heroes are black or of black descent. Is this because black people have not contributed to innovations and discoveries?

A few years ago, I was a PhD student in mathematics and I asked myself similar questions. This was because I needed to see role models, who had blazed the trail I was on, who would inspire me. My quest led me to an article: *Five Famous Black Mathematicians* by Hazel Lewis with thanks to Dr Nira Chamberlain (www.mathscareers.org.uk/five-famous-black-mathematicians/). Katherine Johnson was a name that stood out in this article because she made successful contributions at NASA by doing the calculations that sent the first American to space, which was beautifully captured in the movie *Hidden Figures*.

The Black Heroes of Mathematics Conference was a virtual conference organised on Monday 26 to Tuesday 27 October 2020 by The British Society for the History of Mathematics, The International Centre for Mathematical Sciences, the Institute of Mathematics and its Applications and the London Mathematical Society. The vision of the conference was 'To celebrate the inspirational contributions of black role models in the field

of mathematics'. Over 250 participants from over 30 different countries attended all or part of the event online.

... What can we do to increase the representation of black people in mathematics? ...

Talks covered a range of technical and non-technical topics, with presentations by the following international speakers: Dr Nira Chamberlain, Dr Angela Tabiri, Dr Howard Haughton, Professor Tannie Liverpool, Natalya Silcott, Dr Spencer Becker-Kahn, Professor Nkechi Agwu

and Professor Edray Goins.

At the end of each day, there was a panel discussion with Professor Clive Fraser, Dr Joanna Hartley, Jonathan Thomas, Susan Okereke and the speakers from that day. Questions included: What can we do to increase the representation of black people in mathematics? How can indigenous African mathematics be used to support the learning of mathematics? Why should mathematics teachers be interested in black history month? Do we really need black heroes of mathematics?

One of my favourite quotes at the conference was from Dr Nira Chamberlain:

You do not need anyone's permission to become a great mathematician.

He also said:

Being the first is not something to be proud of, but is a calling to ensure that one is not the last.

Enthusiastic comments from participants included:

What an utterly brilliant, inspiring event – may there be many more!

We hope that one day, we will live in a world where all children feel that maths belongs to them. Until then let us showcase the stories of diverse mathematicians so all of our students feel like they could be mathematicians.

Videos of talks from the conference can be found at media.ed.ac.uk/playlist/details/1_5wohm537

Angela Tabiri

African Institute for Mathematical Sciences Ghana



Panel discussions were held at the end of each day

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