Pioneers of Progress: A Black History Month Study

Learning objective: To analyse the impact of historical figures, evaluate their contributions to society, and develop empathetic, critical thinking skills through non-fiction comprehension.

Read the passage below carefully. Use your inference skills to answer the questions, ensuring you justify your points using evidence from the text where appropriate.

In October, we celebrate Black History Month to honour the extraordinary achievements of Black individuals throughout history. While many think of famous names, history is also shaped by those whose quiet resilience paved the way for future generations. Consider Mary Seacole, a Jamaican-born nurse who travelled to the Crimean War. Despite being rejected by official agencies, she used her own funds—often totalling hundreds of pounds—to establish the 'British Hotel', providing food, medicine, and comfort to wounded soldiers. Her selfless dedication demonstrated that true leadership is defined by action, not just authority. Similarly, the brilliant mathematician Katherine Johnson overcame significant societal barriers to calculate the flight trajectories for the first human spaceflights. Her precision was so renowned that astronauts trusted her calculations over early computer models. These figures teach us that progress is rarely linear; it requires the courage to challenge the status quo and the endurance to continue when faced with adversity.

Word bank: pioneer · resilience · contribution · legacy · perseverance · advocacy · trailblazer

1. Identify two character traits demonstrated by Mary Seacole. Justify your answer by referencing specific actions mentioned in the passage. (2 marks)

2. Explain why the author describes progress as 'rarely linear'. What does this suggest about the nature of historical change? (2 marks)

3. Compare and contrast the contributions of Mary Seacole and Katherine Johnson. In what ways did both women challenge the expectations of their time? (3 marks)

4. The text states that Katherine Johnson’s precision was 'so renowned that astronauts trusted her calculations over early computer models.' Why might this level of trust be considered a significant milestone in history? (2 marks)

5. What might happen if individuals like Seacole and Johnson had chosen to remain silent instead of pursuing their goals? Discuss the potential impact on modern society. (3 marks)

Draw: Draw a commemorative plaque for a modern-day 'trailblazer' of your choice. Include symbols that represent their resilience, their chosen field (e.g., science, art, or social justice), and a short, powerful quote that reflects their values.

Extension challenge: Research a lesser-known figure from Black British history. Write a persuasive 'Letter to the Editor' of a national newspaper arguing why this person's achievements should be included in the National Curriculum. Use sophisticated vocabulary and rhetorical questions to strengthen your argument.