



## Babygirl, you've got this! Experiences of Black girls and women in the English education system

April-Louise M. Pennant, 2024, London, UK, Bloomsbury Publishing, £19.79 (Paperback), 303 pp., ISBN 978-1-3502-7899-8 (Paperback)

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## BOOK REVIEW

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*Babygirl, You've Got This! Experiences of Black girls and women in the English education system* (2024) challenges traditional educational research methodologies through adopting research paradigms that decentre whiteness and using creative methods such as composite characters and storytelling. Focusing specifically on the education system in England, Pennant addresses the lack of research that foregrounds the voices and experiences of Black women and girls. To do this, Pennant utilises Black Feminist Epistemology, presenting the case that lived experience is a form of legitimate knowledge (Collins 2000). Via 42 semi-structured interviews on experiences of education that Pennant conducted between 2016 and 2017 with Black British women, she centres the perspectives of Black girls and women in education in England, helping to fill the literature gap in this area. Examined through the lenses of Critical Race Theory, BlackCrit (Black Critical Theory) and Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, these interviews provide the qualitative data that exemplifies the systemic barriers Black girls and women face in the education system in England, as well as highlighting their achievements, resilience and tools used to navigate such barriers. The application of and specific combination of these lenses, provides rich understanding of the interviewees experiences and goes some way to identifying how to heal the anti-Black gendered racism and classism in the English education system.

There are several noteworthy methodological decisions that Pennant makes in presenting the findings from her interviews. First, Pennant adopts the creative technique of composite characters to weave the experiential knowledge from the qualitative interviews into conceptual and theoretical discussions. The composite characters make visible the many ways in which the 'education steeplechase' – a metaphor used by Pennant to illustrate the additional hurdles Black girls and women have to navigate in the education system – manifests itself. In Chapters 2- 7, we are introduced to a variety of composite characters including Shamari, a Jamaican-British business graduate who co-owns a nail shop and Yaa, a second-generation British Ghanaian woman who attended a predominantly white pre-1992 University. The characters are vehicles through which specific topics are explored, including how anti-Black racism shapes educational journeys and the detrimental impacts on Black women that try to achieve educational success brings.

I want here to highlight the intricacy and thought displayed in these composite characters. The diversity of the characters' backgrounds, socio-economic and education contexts enhances the nuanced exploration of anti-Black gendered racism in education that the book covers. Through the characters, Pennant situates us as readers alongside them and through their viewpoints are shown their experiences of education. This novel approach brings to life the complex, intersectional (Crenshaw 1989, 1991) dynamics of race, gender and class in the education system in England, providing both a critical academic text and a deeply personal and wholly human exploration of the experience of Black girls and women in education. As an approach to presenting research results, this technique deepens empathy and understanding in the reader. More so, the characters allow Pennant to keep the anonymity of her interviewees whilst simultaneously not reduce their experiences to disembodied quotes and quantifiable components. Instead, the characters and their stories – although constructions – present lived experience in a more authentic, complex and considered way that accurately and with dignity reflects the lives of the interviewees.

Another methodological choice made by Pennant is in Chapter One where she uses 'Blackgirl autoethnography' (Boylorn 2016, p. 46) to reflect on her own 'education steeplechase' experiences.

Fittingly, Pennant returns to this in the final chapter, accompanied by words to her younger self that draws on the insights in the book. Like autoethnography, Blackgirl autoethnography provides researchers with the scope to use personal experience as a lens to explore cultural, social and political phenomena. Its points of departure are that it centres the experiences of Black girls and women, resists marginalisation and is underpinned by Black feminist thought and CRT. This approach also breaks with conventional academic writing in which findings are often presented by a writer positioned as objective or detached narrator; someone who is talking about phenomena they observe, not what they have directly experienced. Pennant does not write in this way. She instead uses her *#BlackGirlMagic* (p60) to braid together her own lived experience and chosen research framings, with the experiences of her interviewees (represented in the stories of the composite characters) to present her Overstanding (p221) of the subject matter.

This overall approach aligns *Babygirl, You've Got This!* with Black feminist thought. Pennant uses storytelling and grounding references to Black art and culture as a means of challenging dominant narratives in education, particularly those that pathologize or marginalize people from the Global Majority. Her writing is anti-oppressive practice, justly and equitably presenting the interviews and Blackgirl autoethnography she draws upon as primary data. By adopting CRT and BlackCrit frameworks, Pennant situates her research within a paradigm that not only critiques systemic oppression but also centres the voices and agency of those most affected by these structures. The storytelling within the book handles the lived experiences on which it is based with care and respect, whilst simultaneously ensuring their powerful messages are heard.

*Babygirl, You've Got This!* is an important contribution to both education research and anti-oppressive approaches to working with the lived experiences of people whose voices are often marginalized or 'othered'. Pennant's bold and brave approach questions not only whose voices are prioritized in such work but vitally, how they are presented in research. By foregrounding the experiences of Black girls and women through composite characters and via Pennant's bookending of the work with her own lived experiences, she offers a vivid and authentic portrayal of Black girls and women's experiences of education in England. In sum, through centring Black experiences and culture in her research methods and using creative writing to cultivate empathy and connection in the reader in the presentation of results, Pennant achieves what she sets out to do and is 'checkin' for Black girls and women (p. 4).

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