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Cover Page Footnote

The author would like to thank Sandy Pensoneau-Conway, as well as the CSCA Communication Education interest group, for reviewing and providing feedback on this manuscript. The author declares no conflict of interest for this work. For correspondence regarding this work, please contact India Hagen-Gates at india.hagengates@siu.edu

“What Kind of Teacher are you?”: Critical Communication Pedagogy in *Abbott Elementary*

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In December 2021, Abbott Elementary debuted their first episode, following a cast of diverse teachers at an underfunded elementary school in Philadelphia. Although there is previous research on the importance of tv representation and pedagogical practices in the media, this show presents a unique opportunity for analysis. Using Fassett and Warren’s (2007) commitments of critical communication pedagogy as my main theoretical guide, I argue that Abbott Elementary showcases the ongoing process to improve pedagogy, specifically in the commitments of culture as central, language as constitutive, and reflexivity as essential.

Keywords: critical communication pedagogy, pedagogy, representation, television, media studies

Sitcoms, or situation comedies, are some of the most popular genres for TV comedies (Ross, 2022). Sitcoms allow the audience to follow a cast of characters through often absurd situations, navigating life, relationships, and challenges all through humorous efforts. The more specific genre of *workplace* sitcoms is increasingly popular as well (Ross, 2022). Workplace sitcoms still allow the audience to get close to the characters, but they function through an often-familiar environment of an office. *Abbott Elementary* follows in the footsteps of other workplace comedies like *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Superstore*, *Scrubs*, and *Brooklyn 99*. These incredibly successful shows all center around a workplace, with challenges specific to the focused profession. For *Abbott Elementary*, this workplace is an underfunded elementary school in Philadelphia.

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Although not everyone has worked in city government, like in *Parks and Recreation*, or in a hospital, like in *Scrubs*, everyone has experience in a classroom. Whether as a student, parent, or teacher, *Abbott Elementary* is situated in a familiar place for its audience, depicting very common and real challenges faced by teachers and students today. I argue that this relatable setting, portrayed by a diverse cast, exemplifies strategies of critical communication pedagogy (CCP; Fassett & Warren, 2007). CCP emphasizes the importance of dialogue, cultural identity, reflexivity, and the co-construction of knowledge, aiming to challenge power dynamics and promote social justice in educational settings. By engaging with these principles, *Abbott Elementary* showcases how educators can navigate and address systemic issues within their classrooms. The familiar classroom, and popularity of the show *Abbott Elementary*, helps to uncover the practice of CCP for a wider audience.

Abbott Elementary follows a diverse group of teachers at a school in Philadelphia. There's the main character, Janine, played by the show's creator Quinta Brunson. Janine is a young, optimistic, and eager teacher. She is joined by veteran teachers Barbara and Melissa, a young middle school teacher Jacob, the new substitute Gregory, the longtime janitor Mr. Johnson, and the image obsessed principal Ava (Framke, 2021). These distinct personalities often clash and depict different pedagogical styles, but they also learn from each other and balance one another throughout the season. These characters "represent a mix of identities (races, genders, sexualities, class backgrounds), which shows there's no one way to do this job or one type of person who can help" (Escobar, 2022, para. 5). This cast of characters and familiar setting are obviously striking a chord, with the show quadrupling its initial ratings in a matter of months and earning 100% on Rotten Tomatoes (Escobar, 2022; Peng, 2022).

Brunson gave an interview with *The New York Times* describing her intentions in approaching this project. Brunson noted that many TV shows set in schools focus around the students' experiences rather than the teachers'. While teachers may be present or part of the show, they are often only included to serve the development of the student characters. In contrast, Brunson stated that she wanted to focus on the teachers, stripping away any previous stereotypes associated with the media representation of this profession. In this way, *Abbott Elementary* is able to portray teachers as human, complex, layered, and flawed (Marchese, 2022). Inspired by her hometown of Philadelphia, her mother (who was a teacher) and her favorite teacher Joyce Abbott, Brunson brings authenticity and heart to this story (A. Jackson, 2022). Charles Blow, writing for *The New York Times*, stated, "The show illustrates that while there may be inequities in funding for these schools, there is no shortage of teachers who care and are determined to do the best they can

for their students” (2022, para. 9). Each episode during season one portrays some new challenge that the teachers have to deal with, whether it’s new technology, power outages, supply shortages, or difficult parent-teacher conversations. By portraying these realistic and relatable challenges, *Abbott Elementary* demystifies CCP for audiences, scholars, and educators. The show’s depiction of teachers striving to overcome systemic issues and support their students aligns with the principles of CCP. Using Fassett and Warren’s (2007) 10 commitments of CCP, I argue that *Abbott Elementary* is a positive representation of pedagogy as a continual practice. This analysis aims to highlight how popular media can serve as a valuable tool in understanding and applying CCP, making it more accessible and relatable to a broader audience. Before analyzing *Abbott Elementary*, I explore previous scholarship surrounding the areas of TV representation, public pedagogy, and finally, critical communication pedagogy.

Literature Review

TV Representation

Television representation matters in several ways. “Drawing from Burke, Barry Brummett explains that fictionalized mass-mediated narratives offer lessons for how a culture might resolve widely shared problems insofar as stories ‘follow discursively a patent that people might follow in reality’” (Hoerl, 2020, p. 375). The literature in this section approaches television representations in order to explore how these narratives may impact our realities.

Representation on TV can change how we approach aspects of identity, such as gender, and create discussions around oppressive forces and marginalizing rhetoric. Examining sexist realism and failures of White liberal feminism, Hoerl (2020) evaluates the NBC show *Parks and Recreation*, specifically through the character of Leslie Knope. Hoerl argues that *Parks and Recreation* showcases sexist realism, the idea that, no matter how much we might fight against it, there is no alternative to patriarchy. Hoerl then explains that Knope portrays the *impossible woman*, a rhetorical character that works individually within systems to overcome structural oppressions rather than focusing on collective action or coalition building. Hoerl argues that sexist realism demonstrated within *Parks and Recreation* is linked to capitalist realism. These two chains are intertwined as Leslie tries to overcome misogyny in her workplace as well as fight off greed and corrupt financial interests. The character of Leslie Knope as an impossible woman starkly depicts the limitations of liberal feminism to overcome structural inequalities and gender injustice. Hoerl notes that the efforts of the impossible woman in

Parks and Recreation balance between aspiration and mockery, with Leslie Knope ending the series having overcome many struggles from previous seasons for her individual career. In the end, while the show might function to invite viewers to acknowledge weaknesses in White liberal feminism, Hoerl argues that it does more to normalize sexist realism throughout its run.

Narratives on television shows can also impact how viewers perceive intersectional identities and social justice issues. Sandlin et al. (2011) argue that media messages can function as public pedagogy, creating critical engagement in the audience and challenging dominant ideologies. Petermon and Spencer (2019) explored three different television shows: *Scandal*, *Orange is the New Black (OITNB)*, and *Queen Sugar*. These three shows all attempted to include some storyline on Black Lives Matter (BLM). Petermon and Spencer used a queer Black feminist critical lens in order to evaluate how the story of BLM was included in these different shows. They argue that *Scandal* and *OITNB* fail to depict the queer and intersectional foundations of the BLM movement. While these shows incorporate BLM in distinct ways, they are both made for majority White audiences. Petermon and Spencer argue that the audiences for these shows influenced how the writers and showrunners chose to depict the history and mission of BLM. In *OITNB*, not only is the history of the BLM movement made more palatable for White audiences, but queer Black womanhood is silenced and replaced by a focus on a White character. In opposition, *Queen Sugar*, premiering on the Oprah Winfrey Network to a more diverse audience, acknowledges BLM's queer history and offers a more complex narrative than the other two shows. While Petermon and Spencer argue that *Queen Sugar* includes several improvements over *Scandal* or *OITNB*, they conclude that *Queen Sugar* still attempts to domesticate the BLM movement rather than focusing on its queer, intersectional, and radical history.

Sandlin et al. (2010) argue that learning occurs in so many spaces beyond the traditional education classroom. Media representations of everyday life can act as one of these spaces, engaging in a critical analysis. Ryan and Townsend (2010) explore the tensions between progressive and essentialist teaching styles by reflecting on media representations of teachers and classrooms in the 1950s. During the 1950s in the U.S., there was a greater turn towards the essentialist, banking model of education in the classroom. This pedagogy focused on teacher control and distribution of information in order to perform well on standardized tests. Curious about how our media representations might reflect or inform our reality, Ryan and Townsend looked at several film and television projects during the 1950s. Within their article, they focus on opportunities for student inquiry with the purpose of

information-seeking, sense-making, and wondering. Through their critique, they argue that while the reality of the public school system in the 1950s was shifting towards an essentialist pedagogy, the representations of teachers in film and television included many instances of progressive teaching styles and opportunities for student inquiry. There were many examples of *pretender inquiry* or questions asked not with the purpose of genuine knowledge seeking but instead to reestablish control or discipline behaviors. While many moments of pretender inquiry existed, there were also examples of progressive activities, group work, and encouragement of students to connect personal experience to the course content. Ryan and Townsend argue that these media representations often depicted teacher-centered progressivism or a pedagogy which included progressive strategies with traditional, essentialist goals, like a standardized test. Ryan and Townsend conclude that the tension depicted between progressive and essential teaching styles on screen may have allowed for more moments of genuine student inquiry and wondering than the reality of the 1950s classroom.

Public Pedagogy

Representation in media matters. It can affect how we shape our identity and view others. Additionally, television can impact more than a depiction or reflection of identity and society. Previous literature has evaluated how television can function as an educational tool. Henry Giroux argued, “The electronic media—television, movies, music, and news—have become a powerful pedagogical force, veritable teaching machines in shaping the social imaginary of students regarding how they view themselves, others, and the larger society” (as cited in Fassett & Warren, 1999, p. 30). Accepting this as true, Fassett and Warren (1999) evaluated the film *One Eight Seven* in order to critique the media’s portrayal of student-teacher relationships and teachers’ strategies. They are generally critical of the messaging and portrayal of pedagogy in the film *One Eight Seven*, yet they believe that there is value in critical media literacy. Through their piece, they are able to uncover myths and misrepresentations that have an effect on understandings and practices in pedagogy. Fassett and Warren argue that media can “teach us something about what it means to be a good teacher or student, how the educational enterprise has been or might be, and how Americans (teachers and students, administrators, and parents) should anticipate or fear the possibilities of educational reform” (1999, p. 30).

As a space for public pedagogy, TV can teach us to critically engage in social issues, even when presented in entertaining ways (Sandlin et al., 2011). Looking specifically at the media's impact on students, Guy

(2007) focuses on creating a working definition for popular culture as an impactful part of students' lives. Additionally, Guy argues that popular culture, including television, is a huge vehicle of information for students' and adults' lives. Because popular culture is so prevalent in our everyday lives, Guy (2007) argues that "popular culture teaches us about race, class, gender, and other forms of socially significant difference and can reify these differences into social relationships that take on the aura of normalcy" (p. 16). Also interested in the role that TV plays in our education, Gray (2005) analyzes the role of parody in television, specifically the long running animated series *The Simpsons*, as a media literacy education tool. Gray defines media literacy as well as critical intertextuality in order to analyze how *The Simpsons* successfully parodies ads within its program for the benefit of the audience. Gray argues that the show includes negative depictions of production as well as marketing and advertising departments to shine a light on TV audiences' passive role in consumption, or overconsumption, often driven by advertisements. Gray states that *The Simpsons* attempts to show the "grammar, content, production, and reception" of ads through its use of parody (p. 233). Within this piece, parody is shown as a powerful tool of critical intertextuality, shining light on a genre's inner workings and existing power dynamics in previous pieces of a genre.

With television being prolific and easy to digest, it understandably influences public opinion on certain issues. Exploring the role of TV comedies, Deery (2021) focuses on the genre of the television sitcom, specifically the parliamentary sitcom. Deery argues that the TV sitcom, due to its length of programming and our current attention spans, serves as an important site for rhetorical critique and political commentary. Gray (2005) stated the following:

There is a great deal to be said, for instance, for the 'simple truth' power of comedy, greatly listened to and respected by many. Likewise, because jokes come in small packages, they are easy to retain and to remember, and therefore they travel well. (2005, p. 234)

While set in a fictional world, the parliamentary sitcom can critique modern politics and have an impact on the audiences' opinions. Deery argues that this space should be taken seriously as a site for political thought and should continue to be studied in order to understand the impacts it can have on the public's involvement with politics, political opinions, and media consumption habits. As Guy (2007) argues, "Culture industries such as TV, radio, cinema, the internet, newspapers, magazines, art, and music prolifically develop and disseminate messages about what the society sees as important, valuable, ideal, or desirable" (p. 16). Understanding TV representation and its role as public pedagogy is crucial for this study. Additionally, in order to analyze the pedagogy

represented in *Abbott Elementary*, we move to literature on critical communication pedagogy.

Critical Communication Pedagogy

The field of critical communication pedagogy explores ways that education can challenge societal structures and powerful institutions. As Fassett and Warren (2007) note, CCP attempts to include pedagogical theory and praxis from communication pedagogy and critical pedagogy. Golsan and Rudick (2018) argue, “The goal of CCP is to identify knowledge as a site of privilege/oppression, the uses of communication to perpetuate/reclaim power, and the ability of communicative actions to open spaces for intervening into normative structures of education” (p. 16). Fassett and Warren (2007) break down these goals in detail through their 10 commitments that are created and (re)created in the communication classroom, to further shape the aspirations of a critical communication classroom. These commitments are “identity is constituted in communication” (p. 39); “critical communication educators understand power as fluid and complex” (p. 41); “culture is central to critical communication pedagogy, not additive” (p. 42); “critical communication educators embrace a focus on concrete, mundane communication practices as constitutive of larger social structural systems” (p. 43); “critical communication educators embrace social, structural critique as it places concrete, mundane communication practices in a meaningful context” (p. 45); “language (and analysis of language as constitutive of social phenomena) is central to critical communication pedagogy” (p. 48); “reflexivity is an essential condition for critical communication pedagogy” (p. 50); “critical communication educators embrace pedagogy and research as praxis” (p. 50); “critical communication educators embrace—in their classrooms and in their writing, within their communities, and with their students, research participants, and co-investigators—a nuanced understanding of human subjectivity and agency” (p. 52); and finally, “critical communication educators engage dialogue as both metaphor and method for our relationships with others” (p. 54).

CCP must engage with power at varying levels, independently, interpersonally, and societally. Building upon Fassett and Warren’s (2007) 10 commitments, Golsan and Rudick (2018) break down the pieces of critical communication pedagogy to provide a thorough definition of this area of scholarship. They argue that *social justice*, defined as a promise to work collectively to confront systems of power, must remain at the heart of CCP scholarship and praxis. Instead of reiterating the 10 commitments of CCP defined by Fassett and Warren, they distill these commitments into three main focuses in CCP: identity,

social (re)production, and power. When focusing on identity, Golsan and Rudick emphasize the ways that overlapping systems of culture, politics, and history will construct one's identity through communicative practices. This construction of identity must include a critical eye, especially as instructors and scholars present identities in the classroom. The focus on social (re)production asks CCP scholars to explore "educational institutions as places of both liberation and dehumanization, advocacy and alienation, equity and colonization" (p. 17). The CCP scholar or instructor must then attend to how interpersonal relationships, institutions, and societal systems might be working to produce or reproduce injustices. Finally, through a focus on power, Golsan and Rudick argue that scholars and instructors must interrogate the ways that power is used in the classroom, between students and teachers, but also how power plays out in a plethora of relationships and systems that will affect students' lives.

Even more recently, Romerhausen, Winkelseth, and Rasmussen (2021) extended the practice of critical communication pedagogy to include online education during the pandemic. These authors unpack both theory and praxis as it concerns CCP instruction, then they offer applicable strategies that instructors can use when dealing with students of different socioeconomic backgrounds. With a focus specifically on college or university students in the COVID-19 pandemic, Romerhausen, Winkelseth, and Rasmussen focus on the ways that socioeconomic backgrounds might affect student performance, engagement, and styles of instruction. They utilized data from the Hope Center at Temple University that exposed the ways in which students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have been explicitly affected by COVID-19. The authors argued that through critical communication pedagogy, an instructor has a better chance to understand a student's identity, including hidden barriers for their education (e.g., food and housing insecurity). Now that we have a foundational understanding of television representation, television as an education tool, and CCP, let us move to the analysis.

Analysis

The first season of *Abbott Elementary* included 13 episodes. I watched this show first as a casual fan, without a scholarly project in mind. As a college instructor living on a graduate student stipend, who has found a passion for teaching, I found myself relating to the teachers of *Abbott Elementary*. Their challenges and triumphs became my challenges and triumphs. By the end of the season, I felt like I was watching colleagues rather than fictional, scripted characters. Because of my personal attachments to these characters, I also began to view their

teaching styles as a learning opportunity, noting what I would take or leave from their pedagogy. After finishing this first season of the show, I realized I saw several examples of CCP throughout the narrative. With a more intentional focus, I began to rewatch these 13 episodes, noting important scenes that included some aspects of CCP. After each episode, I looked through my notes, coding the examples according to CCP's 10 commitments. Through this process, I decided to narrow my theoretical guide from Fassett and Warren's (2007) 10 commitments to three of the most salient commitments throughout the show. I chose to use commitment three, "culture is central to critical communication pedagogy, not additive" (p. 42), commitment six, "language (and analysis of language as constitutive of social phenomena) is central to critical communication pedagogy" (p. 48), and commitment seven, "reflexivity is an essential condition for critical communication pedagogy" (p. 50). Although there are a larger number of pertinent scenes, for the sake of a deeper analysis, I chose six specific scenes to make up my constructed artifact. I do not pretend to hold the objective truth about this show or the "correct" interpretation. My ideological views, academic readings, and personal experience have all affected my intentions with this project, and my analysis. Wander and Jenkins (1972) argued the following:

The critic offers, along with a particular judgment, and way of judging, a definition of being. ... [T]he critic is but one human being trying to communicate with other human beings. Criticism, at its best, is informed talk about matters of importance. (as cited in McKerrow, p. 321).

In my repeated viewing of these six scenes, I explored how the show is demonstrating aspects of critical communication pedagogy. Using Fassett and Warren's (2007) commitments as my main theoretical guide, I also turned to additional scholarship to assist in my analysis. I begin this analysis by focusing on Fassett and Warren's third commitment, "culture is central to critical communication pedagogy, not additive" (p. 42).

Culture

The cultural identity of teachers and students impacts the classroom, classroom culture, and classroom relationships. Whether identity is talked about, hidden, or celebrated, cultural identities and understandings contribute to the educational process. In the third episode, "Wishlist," all of the teachers have made lists asking for specific classroom supplies. As the substitute Gregory is still getting situated, Janine finds that he has taken down all of the old teacher's decorations and posters. "I like it. It's clean," Gregory says about the blank walls (Brunson, Murphy, et al.

2022). Janine encourages him to make the space his own and put up other decorations. Janine argues, “The walls are the soul of the classroom... Let them speak from you to your kids. What kind of teacher are you? Who is Gregory?” Motivated by this conversation, Gregory attempts to decorate his room and reveals it to Janine. With posters of animals with sayings like, “The truth is, you can fly,” and “Hang in there,” Janine jokes that it looks like he went to an office supply store and bought the first posters he could find. She asks Gregory, “Is this really a reflection of you?” Fasset and Warren (2007) state that “recognizing and interrogating culture as central to any classroom or curriculum is to complicate the tendency of positivist scholars to define that space as neutral and ‘objective’” (p. 43). Because Gregory is only a substitute teacher at first, he tries to remain distant from his students. Instead of bringing his own identity and culture into the classroom, he tries to make it a completely neutral space that any student could be part of. But by removing any unique cultural elements, Gregory instead creates a cold space that Janine argues does little to communicate to the students.

Throughout the episode, Gregory receives drawings from his students. They all portray Gregory in different scenes: dressed up as Santa, hitting a home run, or teaching on the moon. In another scene between Janine and Gregory, Janine is surprised by the growing number of drawings. “Gregory, these drawings are all of you,” Janine says astonished. “These kids have a real connection to you” (Brunson, Murphy, et al. 2022). At first unsure of what to do with them, in the end, Gregory decides to decorate his walls with all of the student drawings. “I still don’t know what kind of teacher I want to be, but I think I want to stay around and figure it out,” Gregory says.

Through this example, we can learn how the students of Abbott Elementary are connecting to Gregory as a Black male teacher. The entire cast of *Abbott Elementary* is racially diverse, from the teachers to the students. The character of Gregory is the only Black male teacher shown to the audience in the first season and this aspect of his identity seems to be important to his students. As Cummins and Griffin (2012) describe, students of color can often feel more challenged, seen, and heard by instructors who look like them. They note specifically that Black male students, who have historically been categorized by physical rather than intellectual traits, often feel more cared for and challenged by Black male instructors. Cummins and Griffin build on this tenet that culture is central to the classroom to argue for a pedagogy of love that is built on dialogue, commitment, accountability, and trust between students and teachers. The interactions between Gregory and his students, as well as between Gregory and Janine, show that identity and cultural understanding influence how we communicate and define what kind of teachers we want to be.

Imparting culturally relevant lessons can mean balancing knowledge from one's personal experience, while also listening to and learning from students. In episode nine, "Step Class," the audience follows this challenge through the newly created step team. Fine (1991) provides some context on stepping culture and said the following:

Approximately 5,000 individual chapters with half a million members throughout the U.S. participate in stepping. This complex performance event and ritual involves various combinations of dancing, singing, chanting, and speaking, and draws on African-American folk traditions and communication patterns as well as material from popular culture, such as advertising jingles, television theme songs, and top-40 hits. (p. 39)

Janine explains that step helped her while growing up and so she decided to start a step team at Abbott and stated the following:

So I've been teaching step after school here for a few weeks now, and I loved step so much growing up. It provided me structure, you know, that I didn't have at home. The fact that I can now do that for these kids is just a real full-circle moment. (Brunson, McCrory, et al. 2022)

After a few weeks of rehearsal, Ava, the principal, learns about Janine's new step team. Ava also participated in step when she was younger, so she volunteers to help out after school as well. Janine learned structure and discipline through step dancing, while Ava remembers bonding with friends and having fun. This immediately leads to a difference in leadership style. After a rehearsal goes awry, Janine says, "Look, the point of this class was to teach them structure and responsibility, not Cardi B lyrics." Ava responds, "Do you ever talk about anything other than structure and responsibility? ... Step is supposed to be fun and about expressing yourself. You use that to create a routine." Throughout the episode, Janine and Ava struggle for power in the new step club. J. D. Jackson (2001), in an article on the evolution of step dancing, blurs the line between improvisation and set choreography in step dancing. Arguing that improvisation impacts individual and group identity, as well as social commentary in stepping, J. D. Jackson's piece impacts the reading of Janine and Ava's approach to the step team. Janine clearly values set choreography while Ava relies on improvisation and incorporating new moves. But J. D. Jackson's claims shift these two perspectives from opposing splits to two distinct parts of step culture. Understanding improvisation as an important part of step choreography means that both Janine and Ava can impart culturally relevant lessons to their students.

Hastie, Martin, and Buchanan (2006) attempted to move to a culturally-relevant pedagogy by including step dance routines in their physical education classes. Although these authors were White, so their

positionality differed greatly from Janine and Ava's in the show, their essay emphasizes the commitment of culture as central to pedagogy. They note that the history of stepping and its popularity in the U.S. makes this activity "meaningful and relevant" to their students (p. 296). Hastie, Martin, and Buchanan noted that part of the unit's success was their ability to give students a "voice and choice" in their routines (p. 302). In *Abbott Elementary*, after seeing that the students were really engaged and having fun with Ava, Janine realizes that she was thinking more about her own time in step rather than what the students can learn from it. Before their performance in front of the school, Janine makes peace with Ava, saying, "You know, the kids really love that routine that you came up with" (Brunson, McCrory, et al., 2022). Ava says, "It was just something we threw together. The kids are doing the heavy lifting, so yeah." Janine offers an olive branch by inviting Ava to continue with the performance, "Well, if you want, we can still do the performance, together." The episode ends with Janine and Ava stepping together. Step performances can act as a chance to define group identity and create social networks that can last a lifetime (Fine, 1991). These two wildly different characters are able to connect over this shared practice and history. They not only come together to bring out the best in their students, but they also learn from each other as teachers, how to hold more structure and leave room for creativity. In the end, they understand each other more deeply and focus on the importance of step as a communicative practice.

After understanding more deeply how *Abbott Elementary* demonstrates the commitment to culture in the classroom, we move towards Fassett and Warren's (2007) sixth commitment, "language (and analysis of language as constitutive of social phenomena) is central to critical communication pedagogy" (p. 48).

Language

Language has power. Every language choice can affect identity, influence self-esteem, and create lasting change. In episode six titled, "Gifted Program," we follow the teachers of *Abbott Elementary* as they navigate the conversation around the new gifted program for students. Janine, who was part of a gifted program herself, is excited to see students excel and grow in this new program. But after her enthusiasm fades, the teachers at *Abbott* notice some of their students were feeling left out. In one scene, Janine, still fighting to keep the gifted program, struggles to articulate the different groups of students. She says, "We just need to organize it better so that the regular kids, ooh, uh, the ungifted kids, mm, the regifted kids..." (Brunson, Temple, et al., 2022). Then, her coworker Jacob has to step in to say, "Let's lift up the other kids." But

Barbara chimes in saying, “Look, if the program is making the kids feel bad, I don't think it's worth it.” A large part of the struggle with the implementation of their gifted program was the language that they were using to describe the program. They quickly realized that this categorization and separation of students had influenced the construction of their students’ identities. As Rudick and Ellison (2016) note, different language and labels used within the classroom can create self-reinforcing loops that cater only to the dominant understanding of students. Instead, Rudick and Ellison argue that CCP can create a constitutive approach that challenges language used within the classroom that privileges some and marginalizes others. In the gifted program at Abbott, some students were explicitly labeled as “smart” and separated from their classmates, leaving their regular rooms to take part in the gifted program. This labeling and removal can contribute to certain subject formation that can have effects on student identity and performance (Rudick & Ellison, 2016).

Later in this same episode, Gregory speaks to Janine about his personal experience with gifted programs:

Janine, when I was a kid, I didn't get into the gifted program. Like, not even close. It made me feel like school was only for kids who were good at taking tests, which I was not, so I checked out. ... The point is, when you give some kids chickens, other kids are gonna get snakes. And if you get snakes for long enough, that's what you think you deserve. And no one deserves snakes. ... I'm just saying that there's more than one way to be gifted. Have you ever heard of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences? Okay, so look, like, this kid here, right? He may not be good at math, but he may have naturalistic intelligence, which means he's good with nature. Okay, and this girl, she may have musical intelligence. (Brunson, Temple, et al., 2022)

Gregory, reflecting on his own experience of the language of “gifted,” argued for his students’ unique talents and intelligences. This act of naming every student’s strengths contributes to how his students were able to view themselves and participate in the classroom. As Fassett and Warren (2007) state, “Each new naming made possible new understandings of the experience; most poignant were students’ own namings of their experience” (p. 49). Because of Gregory’s push towards new namings, Abbott Elementary created a new possibility for their gifted program. Instead of separating a few students for the gifted program every week, they allowed everyone to participate in special experiments every few weeks. In arguing for this possibility, Janine says, “This way, no kid feels left out. We consider all the intelligences they could have” (Brunson, Temple, et al., 2022).

Even in unplanned lessons or important teaching moments, language choices have the power to challenge oppression and champion students. In episode three, “Wishlist,” there is a specific conversation surrounding the language of access in the classroom. Janine, intending to help Barbara, posts messages on her behalf asking for additional supplies. Barbara discovers these posts and confronts Janine, explaining why she chose not to include her students in these messages surrounding access to supplies and donations. Janine says, “I’m sorry. I just wanted you to have all the tools you deserve and that your kids deserve” (Brunson, Murphy, et al. 2022). Barbara replies, “My kids don’t have half the supplies they need most of the time, but they don’t need to know that.” “Yeah, but I saw your kids painting with empty watercolors,” Janine says. Finally, Barbara has this response:

Our job is to build them up, make them confident. Is it nice to have stuff? Sure. But my students do not need to feel less than because they do not have stuff. So, we talk about what they do have, not about what they don’t.

In this response, Barbara states that she is intentional in the language she uses around her students, understanding that a focus on their lack of supplies and funds can influence the way her students understand themselves and their place in the world.

As Fassett and Warren (2007) state, “particular selections of words create particular worlds” (p. 49). With the creation of the wish lists at Abbott, teachers had to deal with what worlds they were creating for their students based upon class supplies and funding. Through this deliberate discussion of language, Janine learned from Barbara about how language can be used and challenged in the classroom. Kahl (2017) argues “that CCP scholarship should include discussions of how focusing on language as a hegemonic act can be used to ameliorate its presence in society” (p. 119). Barbara’s focus on building up her students, making them feel confident, and focusing on what they do have, rather than what they don’t, was her attempt to empower her students. By sharing her purposeful language choice with the younger teacher, Janine, she passes on this strategy of focusing on students in the classroom, rather than the convenience or access to supplies.

Throughout the first season of *Abbott Elementary*, the show represents the ways that language, and culture, are crucial in the classroom. The final commitment in this analysis moves towards a narrower focus on the teachers of Abbott Elementary. We now move to Fassett and Warren’s (2007) seventh commitment, “reflexivity is an essential condition for critical communication pedagogy” (p. 50).

Reflexivity

“Reflexivity is the process of exploring how we, as teachers and researchers, create the phenomena we observe, through our assumptions, values, past experiences, language choices, and so on” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 50). Reflexivity constantly challenges teachers to honestly review their practice, knowing that this process of reflection and improvement can never end. Throughout *Abbott Elementary*, perhaps due to the genre of the sitcom, the characters consistently fail to overcome challenges. At first, it seems that they are failing to engage in reflexivity. Often at the beginning of episodes, the teachers are presented with a challenge, attempt to fix it through some means or another, and eventually have to face the ways their pedagogy must evolve in order to help their students. They fail, learn, and then change. Repeat. This constant failure is not a sign of a lack of reflexivity. Failure, reflecting honestly, and learning is a crucial part of the ongoing reflexivity process.

Throughout the season, there are several moments when the teachers of Abbott are pushed to be reflexive. In episode four, “New Tech,” the teachers of Abbott are given new tablets to assist them in their reading lessons. While many teachers are excited about this new technology, Barbara is confused but does not speak up in the teacher’s meeting. Janine, sensing Barbara’s uncertainty with the tablets, is eager to help her mentor. Janine says, “I need her help every day, so if I can return the favor just once, it means I’m no longer a newbie... I’m her peer” (Brunson, Rubenstein, et al., 2022a). But Barbara is unwilling to ask for help and stated the following:

I’m going to continue teaching my students how to read like I have been for 30 years. I’ll input whatever information I need to into that program, and then I’ll just keep doing what I have been doing, and everybody else will just have to back off.

Janine maintains her excitement to help saying, “Barbara says she’s doing well, but this program is really hard. She just has a ton of pride, so I’m gonna wait for her to come and ask me for help.” Swerzenski (2021) notes that while there are many advantages to new technologies in the classroom, it requires the teacher to master the tools in order to reach more than just a transmission model of education. Within this episode, Barbara struggles to understand the new technology. While all the other classes are able to incorporate tools from the new reading assistants, Barbara’s students remain in their usual habits of instruction. Because of their relationship, Janine is eager to assist her, but Barbara is not used to being taught by a young, new teacher.

As all the teachers try to implement the new technology in their classes, it is announced that Barbara’s Kindergarten students are reading at a fourth grade reading level. Barbara, not understanding the new technology, was inputting random scores, hoping no one would notice. After trying to keep up the facade, it is eventually revealed to the other

teachers that Barbara never actually knew how to use the new tablets and had not incorporated any new materials from the technology. Janine, feeling hurt by this, asks, “Why wouldn't you let me help you?” (Brunson, Rubenstein, et al., 2022a). Barbara says, “I was handling it the best way I could.” Janine responds, “By lying instead of letting me help you?” Barbara opens up to Janine and stated:

I am good at this job, and I know how to do it well, but admitting that I couldn't figure this program out, it was like I was saying, ‘I am getting too old.’ And you don't know what that feels like... All these new people and this new tech, it just made me feel like I was being pushed out to sea.

Barbara’s initial lack of reflexivity and focus on pride creates a disadvantage for her students. Berry (2013) reminds us that drawing mindfulness into our reflexive practice can allow us to acknowledge parts of our lived experiences while realizing this is not all of who we are. He also notes how this reflexivity can impact not only our pedagogical practices, but this mindfulness can influence our very identities. Barbara, utilizing a practice of mindful reflexivity, could have recognized that she is getting older and needs help with new technology without assuming that she is getting pushed out. At the end of the episode, Janine is able to comfort Barbara, acknowledging that the new technology was difficult for all of the teachers to implement in their classes. Swerzenski (2021) argues that even with new inclusions of technology and online spaces, classrooms must remain collaborative spaces. In this spirit, Barbara and Janine agreed to figure out the new technology together.

In episode ten, “Open House,” Janine is eagerly waiting to meet a parent that she hasn’t been able to connect with. Including parent-teacher interactions in the show is important as these relationships impact our pedagogical practices. As Ankrum (2016) argues, teachers should be aware of parents' perspectives and attempt to accommodate their needs in order to make them feel like “thought-partners, and a part of the team” (p. 170). During the open house, as time ticks on, the audience sees Janine move from hopeful to disappointed. The parent finally shows up after the open house has ended and meets Janine who is on her way out. Impacted by her own relationship with her mother, Janine responds to the parent by saying, “The Open House closed at 8:00. It's 8:30, so, no, sorry, you missed it. ... I've been trying to get you in this classroom all year. You had plenty of time to get here” (Brunson, Rubenstein, et al., 2022b). As the mother tries to get a word in, Janine continues to cut her off:

I'm tired of excuses. You weren't here when you said you would be. Your kid's having trouble, and are you there for them? No. You're

doing whatever you want because the whole world revolves around you. ... Just be there for your kid.

Finally, the mother opens her coat to reveal she's wearing scrubs and says that she was stuck in the E.R. at the end of her shift. After cutting away from the scene, we return to see Janine apologizing and admitting that she was letting her own relationship with her mother impact how she viewed this parent. This interaction between parent and teacher exposes a misinterpretation by Janine but also a quick correction. Fasset and Warren (2007) emphasize that reflexivity is not an end goal but an ongoing practice in our pedagogy. Reflexivity does not require perfection; in fact, it involves repeated mistakes, missteps, or misunderstandings. Reflexivity involves the process of responding to these mistakes with attention and mindfulness. According to Berry (2013), "Mindful practice entails aspiring to be curiously, gently, and honestly present and in the moment, and opening ourselves to the pleasant and dissatisfying experiences comprising the relationships we maintain with ourselves and others" (p. 15). In this way, our pedagogy can continue to evolve and change as we practice reflexivity across our many stories. This mindful reflexivity can impact how we understand ourselves, hold ourselves accountable, and move into a more compassionate and engaged pedagogy.

Conclusion

After all of the struggles and challenges that the season presented, the show ends with the teachers of Abbott Elementary recommitting to their students at the end of the school year. Gregory, who started as a substitute teacher, signs a contract to remain at Abbott. Barbara, after feeling too old after several difficult encounters, feels re-inspired to teach. And Janine, who could not quiet her class in the first episode, gains control of a bus of rowdy students after a field trip. This version of Janine fits with Cummins' (2014) critical communication pedagogy of care:

A caring teacher is not one whom students can push over and/or manipulate to get what they want. Rather, a caring teacher is one who sees the best possible future for the student (in consultation with the student's wishes) and works with that student to achieve those goals. (p. 89)

Janine grew as a teacher through every episode, reminding us that critical communication pedagogy is a continuous practice not a final destination.

Within this paper, I have argued that *Abbott Elementary* functions as an important piece of media representing several commitments of Critical Communication Pedagogy. Rather than making teachers or the classroom a background storyline on the show, *Abbott Elementary* is

breaking new ground by focusing on teachers committed to improving their craft. Although the show often brings up the issue of funding in their district, the teachers remain dedicated to their students. By using Fassett and Warren's (2007) commitments to critical communication pedagogy, my analysis demonstrated how the teachers of Abbott Elementary are participating in an ongoing practice to improve their pedagogy in the classroom. Through my critical viewing and analysis, I seek to demystify CCP, making it accessible for audiences to understand through a popular medium of the TV sitcom. By focusing on the commitments towards culture, language, and reflexivity, I was able to explore how the teachers overcame challenges and obstacles using their pedagogical practice. As Fassett and Warren state, "commitments don't fall from the sky fully formed; we (re)create them in and through our work with others" (p. 38). As the teachers at Abbott Elementary faced new struggles every episode, they (re)created the commitments of culture as central, language as constitutive, and reflexivity as essential, often working together and learning from each other. In other respects, we can also create, and recreate, our critical communication pedagogy as we learn from the teachers of Abbott Elementary.

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