

Abbott Elementary on ABC: Comedy in the tragedy of public education

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The appalling state of public education in the US, particularly in schools located in low-income areas, is a measure of ruling class depravity and a subject worthy of tragedy. The COVID-19 pandemic, as it has with all the social crises, has only exacerbated this condition. Any attempt to find comedy in a contemporary urban elementary school would have to be either highly obtuse or unusually smart.

Abbott Elementary, set in a dilapidated Philadelphia school, is smart. Aired on ABC and streamed on Hulu, the show premiered in December 2021 and has gained both critical accolades and a loyal following, including among teachers. An *Entertainment Weekly* review finds *Abbott Elementary* “a good show that could grow into greatness.” Such a claim may be optimistic.

Quinta Brunson is the creator of *Abbott Elementary* and plays its lead character, the young, idealistic Janine Teagues, whose weekly battles with the symptoms of deprivation show off her exuberance and indomitability. Brunson is a talented writer (she wrote the pilot episode) and comic performer, who keeps Janine likable despite her gadfly role. She irritates the older teachers, but her noble causes and self-deprecating humor consistently win over the viewer.

Abbott Elementary uses a mockumentary format, complete with handheld camera and ironic sidelong glances at the viewer. In fact, the first five episodes of *Abbott* were directed by Randall Einhorn, who also directed *The Office*, and *Abbott Elementary* has some of the look and feel of that earlier series.

Abbott features a strong ensemble cast. Comedian Janelle James struts and preens and fires off sparkling one-liners as the school’s wonderfully horrible principal, Ava Coleman. Chris Perfetti is meticulously dorky in the role of history teacher Jacob Hill, the only other new teacher, along with Janine, to have returned to *Abbott* for a second year. Jacob, who is white, is the only character in the show who regularly refers to race, in his nervous efforts to be a liberal “ally.” In fact, in its treatment of Jacob’s wokeness, *Abbott Elementary* refreshingly mocks the suffocating trend of racialism in American culture.

Rounding out the cast are Lisa Ann Walter as the tough, and connected, South Philly native Melissa Schemmenti, and Tyler James Williams as substitute teacher Gregory Eddie. Gregory is as deadpan as Melissa is volatile, which helps to give the show

an effective tonal range.

Finally, there is Sheryl Lee Ralph (nominated for a Best Actress Tony in 1981 for *Dreamgirls*) who stands out as the still-middle-aged, no-nonsense kindergarten teacher Barbara Howard, whom Janine idolizes and who reluctantly acts as a mentor to the effervescent younger teacher.

The show is enjoyable, good for a few laughs each episode and capable of well-aimed barbs at the underfunding of education. In the first episode, Janine holds up a history textbook opened to an image of George W. Bush and explains to the camera that she has had to paste in pictures of the subsequent presidents, turning the page to show a photocopied image of Barack Obama. In the same episode, Janine notes that, while she cannot secure rugs for her classroom, the city has found money to renovate the Philadelphia Eagles’ football stadium.

To the show’s credit, its humor is never drawn from situations that ignore the social context. It is not just a “workplace comedy” that happens to be set in a school. Instead, the school and its underfunding are the point and always front and center, and the laughs come from the friction between various approaches the teachers take to dealing with the school’s faltering facilities (strobing fluorescent lights, a toilet nicknamed “reverse flush”) and lack of supplies.

The older teachers, Barbara and Melissa, have developed a “You can’t fight city hall” attitude and are proud of the results they achieve by working with what they have. As Barbara says in one episode, she does not want the children thinking about what they don’t have. Janine, however, believes there is always a way to get what the school needs.

So far, Janine’s methods involve work-arounds: A rug is stolen by one of Melissa’s connections working on the stadium renovation; Janine makes a social media video (with Ava’s help) to ask for supplies on her “wishlist.” These are seen as triumphs, and it is here that *Abbott Elementary* bumps up against its political limitations. Crime and charity are hardly the answer to deprivation. But given its almost inevitable boundaries, *Abbott Elementary* offers an honest (if a bit sanitized) look at the contemporary classroom, and with a satiric edge.

However, these are not the primary merits of the show in the

eyes of Phelton Moss, assistant professor at Mississippi's Tougaloo College and an entrepreneur in the booming "diversity, equity and inclusion" market. Writing in *Education Week*, Moss describes "What *Abbott Elementary* Gets Right About Black Teachers." Which is to say, he exploits the program's characters and setting to propound an insidious, race-based view of education.

Moss makes his living promoting the quasi-segregationist identity politics that have come to dominate, and degrade, academic culture. Such thinking subordinates all social and political considerations to the category of "race" and often goes so far as to attribute inherent qualities to individuals based on their "race."

Citing loosely the work of education researcher Gloria Ladson-Billings, Moss uses his approval of *Abbott Elementary* to share his thoughts on the role of race in teaching:

In the early 1990s, Ladson-Billings provided a framework for understanding the practices and pedagogical moves of culturally relevant teachers—most often Black teachers. Culturally relevant teachers lead with a set of innate, deliberate actions to uphold the dignity of students and their peers. Culturally responsive teachers often get results, have high expectations, help students see their ethnic identity in a positive light, are strong advocates, and organically build relationships.

That such language can find a publisher in a supposedly respectable education journal is appalling.

In her 1995 article "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," published in the *American Educational Research Journal*, Ladson-Billings described a certain kind of teaching as "culturally relevant," in this drawing upon conceptions that she ultimately traces to Brazilian education theorist Paulo Freire, whose book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is so popular with pseudo-left trends.

Moss, however, extrapolates from "culturally relevant pedagogy" to "culturally relevant teachers." Is it their approach to teaching that makes these teachers relevant, we may ask? For Moss, the relevance lies in their race, from which their pedagogy flows naturally. That he qualifies this idea with the words "most often Black teachers" feels particularly perfunctory when one reads that the teachers he has in mind "lead with a set of *innate* " actions and " *organically* build relationships."

This is the essentializing language of race. It is always reactionary, always amenable to the right wing. For decades such language was anathema in academia, where "race" was a category to be dismantled. While the seeds of this racialism can be discerned in the 1990s work of academics like Ladson-

Billings, it has taken the deepening crisis of capitalism over several decades to bring it to its fruition in the regressive rhetoric of hucksters like Moss and the *1619 Project*'s Nikole Hannah-Jones, on the one hand, and the newly energized, outright white supremacist activists, on the other.

Moss concludes his essay with another telling paragraph:

As education leaders and policymakers look for ways to improve student outcomes and close opportunity and achievement gaps, one solution may already be in classrooms. Black teachers can serve as role models for the profession and should be empowered and rewarded for the way they show up for students and their communities. We need more teachers like Barbara, Janine, and Gregory.

Black teachers should make more money. Unquestionably. So should *all* teachers. And they deserve clean, modern school buildings, ample supplies and up-to-date books and technology. Public education has been intentionally starved in the US for decades, by Republicans and Democrats alike. As a result, educators are leaving the profession in droves, as *Abbott Elementary* makes clear. This was already the case before the ruling class and their lackeys in the teachers unions extorted teachers back into unsafe classrooms.

Further, Moss's retrogressive idea that black teachers should teach black children because they are both "black" fosters the very racialism that it is the business of education to cleanse the brain of.

The objective of careerists like Moss and Hannah-Jones is to grab as much of the diminishing academic pie as possible, but their endeavors would not have been as successful as they have been without the backing of sections of the ruling elite. Bankrolled by corporate America to the tune of billions of dollars, academia, mainstream journalism and Hollywood churn out endless paeans to identity politics. The objective of the capitalists is, as it has ever been, to divide the working class.

Despite Moss's misuse of the show, *Abbott Elementary* provides a welcome, if small, space in the corporate media that puts up some resistance to racialism and division.



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