



Article

From Deficit Thinking to Systemic Analysis: Utilizing *Abbott Elementary* as Public Pedagogy in the Interdisciplinary Classroom

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Abstract

In an era where entertainment media increasingly functions as public pedagogy, higher education instructors must navigate how these platforms shape students' perceptions of social and political issues. This study explores the possibilities of integrating the sitcom *Abbott Elementary* into an undergraduate interdisciplinary Honors seminar to challenge deficit-based perspectives on urban education and shift student focus toward systemic policy analysis. Using a qualitative exploratory design, this localized course design inquiry analyzed Initial and Final Reflections from 24 students with diverse academic backgrounds. The curriculum employed a multiperspectival analysis, pairing television episodes with scholarly research and authentic community voices. Findings reveal a qualitative thematic shift in student discourse: participants moved from articulating hegemonic, deficit-oriented views toward more humanizing and complex conceptualizations of critical issues shaping urban education. Students increasingly identified policy-driven factors over individual community "failures". These results suggest that leveraging contemporary popular culture as a primary academic text provides a useful framework for fostering critical thinking and policy literacy. Consequently, interdisciplinary media-based pedagogy serves as an engaging tool for involving diverse student populations in educational equity discourse.

Keywords: popular culture; television; public pedagogy; cultural studies; interdisciplinary studies; urban schools; media representations of education; *Abbott Elementary*

1. Introduction

In a rapidly evolving information landscape, media boundaries constantly blur the lines between entertainment and public discourse. Shows once categorized strictly as leisure now circulate complex perspectives on policy issues [1]. As Kachorsky and colleagues [2] note, the media's role in shaping national knowledge requires that scholars interrogate how these platforms construct social realities. Giroux [3] posits that film and television function as "public pedagogy", educational forces defined by their political character. For instructors, engaging with public pedagogy is a useful approach; students enter classrooms already inundated by media that shapes their perceptions of course content.

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These media forms deeply impact public opinion because their encoded ideologies can either perpetuate or challenge social norms [4–6]. Consequently, popular culture serves as a powerful interdisciplinary bridge, merging intellectual rigor with affective engagement. However, this integration requires intentionality and a high degree of criticality. Mainstream narratives often mirror dominant cultural perspectives, potentially reinforcing harmful stereotypes if left unexamined. In the context of educational policy, instructors must support students in deconstructing these dominant narratives to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Schools are a ubiquitous setting in popular media, influencing how individuals perceive the teaching profession and students [4,5]. Currently, the American sitcom *Abbott Elementary* stands as the most successful mainstream representation of this genre. An Emmy-winning mockumentary documenting a Philadelphia public elementary school, the series utilizes humor to address systemic policy issues, including teacher shortages, chronic underfunding, and the complexities of school choice.

Framing *Abbott Elementary* as a form of public pedagogy [3,7], this paper explores an introductory design [8] through a critical intersectional multiculturalism approach to cultural studies [6]. Our primary objective is to illustrate how this curriculum can disrupt deficit-based perspectives regarding urban schools, shifting focus away from community blame toward systemic structures.

We present findings from a qualitative exploratory study [9] of an undergraduate Honors seminar focused on *Abbott Elementary*. We first outline our conceptual framework of public pedagogy [3,7] and critical intersectional multiculturalism [6,10]. We then review “urban school” media literature, situating *Abbott Elementary* as a distinct counternarrative. After presenting the methodology and findings, we offer practical recommendations for leveraging popular culture to foster critical thinking.

2. Conceptual Framework

This study employs an integrated conceptual framework that merges public pedagogy [3,7], a critical intersectional multiculturalism approach to cultural studies [6,10], and the foundational tenets of critical pedagogy [11,12], particularly as they relate to the civic and democratic purposes of higher education [13]. Together, these theoretical lenses ground this curriculum as a localized pedagogical intervention to support undergraduate students in transitioning from passive media consumption to structural policy critique. Public pedagogy illuminates why contemporary television media like *Abbott Elementary* serves as a valuable site of public socialization and scholarly inquiry [3,7]; critical cultural studies offers the interpretive toolkit for unpacking these popular texts [6]; and critical higher education pedagogy establishes the overarching objective: cultivating the civic agency, active citizenship, and democratic participation required to navigate complex socio-educational debates [11–13].

2.1. Public Pedagogy: The “Why” of Popular Culture in Higher Education

Media does not merely reflect culture; it actively constructs it [3,7]. Giroux argues that media functions as a “space of translation” where ideologies and values are put into public conversation [7] (p. 691). As a form of public pedagogy, television shows produce images and ideologies that shape public attitudes and instruct viewers on conforming to dominant systems of norms and legitimizing power structures [4–6]. In an educational climate frequently dominated by individualized consumerism and marketized values, higher education occupies a fragile yet essential space for keeping democratic possibilities alive [13]. As Walker [13] posits:

“Higher education bestows cultural capital, values and knowledge that are increasingly important to active citizenship and democratic participation in the ethical and political debates that shape our lives. In other words, higher education ought to have a central role to play in the health of democracy in society, in its contribution to civic life and in producing educational identities which support higher education’s civic capacity” (p. 43).

Grounding a university seminar in public pedagogy directly serves this civic mission. As traditional avenues for civic education diminish, popular media has become a primary mode of communication that connects personal experiences to larger social issues [7]. When a text like *Abbott Elementary* is leveraged as an “interpretive framework” [6] (p. 123), it can make complex institutional challenges, such as chronic underfunding and teacher labor shortages, accessible through the humor and heart of a mockumentary format. Integrating media into university course design challenges “officially sanctioned” knowledge, which often views entertainment as antithetical to academic rigor [14]. By connecting pleasure to meaning, instructors can utilize media to engage students in deep ideological and affective work [5], explicitly supporting the development of student identities geared toward democratic public life [13].

2.2. Cultural Studies: The “How” of Critical Engagement

While popular media is a powerful pedagogical force, its meanings are not passively transmitted but are actively produced, consumed, and reproduced [15,16]. To move undergraduates from passive consumption to critical deconstruction, this study draws on the overlapping domains of critical intersectional multiculturalism [6] and Freirean critical pedagogy [11,12]. Ontologically, critical pedagogy treats learning not merely as a theory of static being, but as an active process of *becoming* [11, 12]. This model relies on a dialogical, problem-posing approach to learning, which actively critiques existing social, political, and economic structures to understand how power and domination inform institutional sorting and selecting practices [11–13]. By explicitly merging these lenses within an interdisciplinary setting, the course design seeks to develop students’ criticality, a capacity encompassing the development of knowledge, self, and action, embodied in individuals prepared to engage in reflective learning communities [13]. Within this critical framework, “civic agency, citizenship and democratic participation are then integral to the purposes of higher education and educating students for democratic public life” [13] (p. 44).

2.2.1. Encoding, Decoding, and Agency

The lifecycle of a cultural text begins with the creator (encoder). *Abbott Elementary*’s creator, Quinta Brunson, draws on lived experiences to encode the show with urban classroom realities, though its meaning can be subjected to “epistemic hegemony”, where corporate norms may regulate creative freedom [17]. Students (decoders) consume these texts from three distinct positions [15]:

1. Dominant-hegemonic position—viewers unthinkingly accept the encoded message, seeing “the [media] as the [media] sees itself” [14] (p. 124);
2. Negotiated position—viewers acknowledge the intended message, but adapt it to local situational contexts [6];
3. Oppositional position—viewers decode the message contrary to the creator’s intent, critiquing the media’s construction.

Public responses to *Abbott Elementary*’s charter school storyline illustrated these varying positions, ranging from praise to critiques of mischaracterization [18–20]. Moving students toward negotiated and oppositional decodings is a fundamentally democratic

project; it allows undergraduates to exercise semiotic agency, resist sociocultural manipulation, and create alternative readings grounded in structural realities [6]. This analytical shift mirrors Freire's [11,12] call to transform education into the "practice of freedom", encouraging students to defamiliarize their taken-for-granted worlds and recognize their capacity to challenge power dynamics as active citizens within a participatory society [13].

2.2.2. Critical Intersectional Multiculturalism and Multiperspectival Analysis

A critical intersectional multiculturalism approach validates diverse groups and centers historically oppressed communities [6]. Featuring a predominantly Black cast, *Abbott Elementary* centers a perspective often overlooked in both mainstream media and urban education research. Applying intersectionality [21], students identify how race, class, and gender intersect within systemic oppression and resistance.

The primary analytic tool used in this seminar was multiperspectival analysis, which requires students to employ three distinct lenses to achieve a comprehensive, structurally literate reading of the text: political culture (production conventions), textual analysis (discourse and narrative structures), and audience reception (viewer impact) [6,10]. This three-pronged analysis supported students in deconstructing *Abbott Elementary* to better grasp the ideological dimensions of urban education. By communicating across differing perspectives and experiences in a shared, public pedagogical space, students engage in a reflective learning community, producing an enlarged understanding of the world that supports the broader democratic goals of civic life [13].

3. Literature Review

While popular media portrayals of urban schools have been utilized in higher education for decades, integrating *Abbott Elementary* into an undergraduate interdisciplinary seminar to explore educational policy issues represents a significant departure from established norms. Historically, when "urban schools" media enters the university classroom, it is almost exclusively sequestered within teacher preparation programs to prompt personal reflection among pre- and in-service teachers. While such reflection is valuable, it often lacks the critical engagement necessary to deconstruct systemic issues. Furthermore, focusing solely on teacher candidates ignores the potential impact these media forms have on the broader public's understanding of education.

Most often, the media used in these contexts perpetuate "Hollywood" tropes that center on individual heroics rather than structural analysis. *Abbott Elementary*, conversely, functions as a counternarrative by disrupting deficit-based tropes and centering marginalized perspectives, specifically those of Black women educators. In the following sections, we review the literature regarding the typical use of "urban schools" media in the university classroom to illustrate the necessity of shifting toward an interdisciplinary, policy-oriented pedagogical approach.

3.1. The Role of "Urban Schools" Media in the University Classroom

Historically, the use of school-based media in higher education has been concentrated within teacher education at both the undergraduate [22–25] and graduate levels [5,14,26–30]. Within these contexts, instructors typically leverage media in classroom management [23,25] and multicultural education [16,27,31,32] courses, or as a supplement to clinical practicums in urban settings [14,30,31]. When higher education pedagogy utilizes media narrowly in this manner, it frequently risks defaulting to an instrumentalist or technicist discourse, focusing on practical checklists rather than exploring how pedagogy, culture, and power intersect in the public sphere [13].

3.1.1. Media as a Catalyst for Reflection

The “urban schools” media canon in higher education is dominated by a specific genre of “inspired by a true story” feature films from the 1980s through the early 2000s, including *Stand and Deliver* (1988), *Lean on Me* (1989), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *The Ron Clark Story* (2006), and *Freedom Writers* (2007). Conventionally, these films are used as tools for personal or pedagogical reflection. Instructors often present them as benchmarks to help candidates cultivate a professional identity [4,23,24,27] or as prompts for general interpretation [16,22,26].

In these scenarios, the media serves as a mirror to challenge a candidate’s personal misconceptions about teaching [25]. However, as critics note, this approach often fails to treat media as a complex cultural text loaded with political, economic, and social codes that require deep dissection [4,5,27]. By reducing these texts to decorative, inspirational hooks for individual professional identity work, traditional higher education practices can lean toward an uncritical “banking” model of education [11]. This passivity can insulate undergraduates from genuine critical learning or ethical deliberation, leaving the macro socio-political architecture of schooling completely unexamined [13]. While some scholars have pushed for more critical deconstructions, explicitly applying concepts like discursive racism [32] or the “White Savior Industrial Complex” [5] to teach critical praxis, the ultimate goal remains narrow: the development of the individual teacher’s expectations and skills [4].

3.1.2. Limitations and Potential of the “Case Study” Approach

Research on the impact of these media integrations has yielded mixed results. While Hollywood representations can serve as a catalyst for realigning teacher expectations [22,26], the quality of the representation is a critical variable. Media that perpetuates deficit-based narratives can inadvertently reinforce hegemonic biases rather than disrupt them [26]. For instance, Aronson [5] found that even after explicit critiques of “white saviorism”, students often struggled to eliminate savior-based discourse from their own reflections, suggesting that the media itself can reinforce the very narratives instructors seek to dismantle.

To move beyond these limitations, scholars like Miretzky [16] and Vandermeesch and colleagues [33] advocate using media as a provocative and compelling field site for examination and critique, rather than merely as an object of reflection. In this “case study” model, media allows students to vicariously experience pedagogical dilemmas and social confrontations [24,30] and engage with them as fictionalized field sites.

Our study takes up this call but extends it in two critical ways. First, we move the context from teacher preparation to an interdisciplinary seminar, acknowledging that educational policy affects all citizens, not just educators. This alignment re-centers a foundational tenet of critical higher education pedagogy: that the university must reclaim its central role in the health of democracy and civic life by producing “educational identities which support higher education’s civic capacity” [13] (p. 43). By moving beyond teacher preparation, this study explores how students from diverse academic disciplines, each bringing their own unique cultural frames and disciplinary lenses, engage with media as a public pedagogy to understand systemic educational issues.

Second, we transition from using media as a catalyst for personal reflection to using it as a primary text for analyzing the policy-driven lived realities of urban schools. By implementing a dialogical, problem-posing curriculum [11] around *Abbott Elementary*, a show that centers systemic challenges over individual heroics, we treat the interdisciplinary higher education classroom as a public arena where the capacities for active citizenship, structural critique, and democratic public life are explicitly cultivated [11,13].

3.2. *Abbott Elementary* as a Counternarrative Within the Genre

While *Abbott Elementary* centers on an urban school setting, it operates against a deep-seated historical backdrop. Many scholars trace the “urban schools” media genre back over seventy years to the 1955 film *Blackboard Jungle* [34]. By the 1990s, this genre had cemented a specific set of tropes in American popular culture that flattened the reality of the education system into binary narratives: teachers are portrayed either as “saintly caregivers” or “lazy babysitters” [35].

The traditional “urban schools” genre frequently perpetuates the myth of meritocracy and the “culture of poverty” narrative [36]. These stories typically follow a standardized plot: a lone, typically white “outsider” enters a “chaotic” school and miraculously transforms unmotivated students through sheer force of personality [26,34]. By focusing on individual heroics, these narratives disregard the powerful political, economic, and social forces at play [37,38]. In this version of education, the solution to urban school challenges is presented as an individual one, reforming the character of the teacher or the student, rather than a systemic one addressing the sociopolitical context.

3.2.1. The Abbott Phenomenon and Its Format

Premiering in December 2021, *Abbott Elementary* immediately disrupted this landscape by chronicling a group of passionate teachers in a Philadelphia public school who, despite systemic odds, remain determined to help their students succeed [39]. Its success was instantaneous, with 2.9 million viewers watching live [37]. Within five weeks, nearly 7 million people watched via multi-platform engagement, marking ABC’s largest engagement with any new comedy premiere [40]. Now entering its sixth season (as of October 2026), the show’s critical and cultural acclaim is well established.

The show’s primary affordance as a pedagogical text lies in its mockumentary format. By utilizing a “documentary crew” to record the lives of the characters, the show employs a hybrid form of storytelling that blends truth with satire [41]. This allows for “confessional” style interviews where characters speak directly to the camera, offering a form of meta-commentary on the events of the episode [42]. This satiric blending of truth and fiction allows the show to critique systemic failures without resorting to the deficit-based blaming of individual characters or communities that defines the broader genre. For higher education students, this format provides an “insider’s perspective” that makes systemic critiques more accessible; the humor and satire “mock” the absurdity of the system’s failures rather than the people within it [41].

3.2.2. The Ensemble as a Site of Multiperspectival Analysis

Unlike the “lone hero” narratives of the past, *Abbott Elementary* utilizes an ensemble cast that reflects a diversity of experiences and identities, providing multiple entry points for student analysis. The show’s narrative begins with the novice perspectives of Janine Teagues and Jacob Hill, who represent the complexities of entering the profession. Played by creator Quinta Brunson, Janine embodies the “Resilient Black Girl Dork” [43] and functions as the idealistic beginner. Her perpetual optimism is frequently juxtaposed with Jacob (Chris Perfetti), a young, white, gay man who serves as a satirical take on the “woke teacher” trope. This novice energy is balanced by the seasoned insights of veteran educators Barbara Howard (Sheryl Lee Ralph) and Melissa Schemmenti (Lisa Ann Walter). As a deeply religious and self-assured Kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Howard takes pride in maintaining an orderly classroom despite limited institutional support. She is often paired with Melissa, a second-grade teacher who uses her South Philly Italian American roots and community connections to secure resources for her students. Together, these veterans offer an “insider” perspective on sustaining a long-term career within under-resourced settings.

The school's administrative layer adds further complexity through the characters of Ava Coleman (Janelle James) and Gregory Eddie (Tyler James Williams). While Ava initially appears unqualified as a principal, her character eventually reveals a "Hustler-In-Chief" approach to leadership, employing unconventional and strategic methods to meet the school's material needs [44]. Gregory, who enters Abbott as a long-term substitute with aspirations for the principalship, provides a grounded, serious contrast to Ava's antics. Ultimately, this multifaceted ensemble structure is a crucial affordance; it disrupts the notion of individualism by suggesting that no one teacher is responsible for single-handedly changing a student's life. Instead, it portrays a community of educators working collectively to navigate a broken system [35].

3.2.3. Centering Systemic Advocacy over "Saving"

Abbott Elementary functions as a counternarrative by shifting the focus from "saving" students to "advocating" within a system. By centering a predominantly Black cast and Black female lead (Janine), the creators disrupt the "white savior" narrative [45]. The teachers at Abbott do not believe their students need to be fixed; rather, they draw attention to the root causes of school struggle: chronic underfunding, teacher burnout, and inequitable policy mandates [46].

Quinta Brunson, whose mother was a public-school teacher, intentionally designed the show to move beyond the dour portrayals of urban reform [47]. As a comedy that remains grounded in systemic analysis, the show uses absurdism and satire to point out failures in the system. This creates an applicable blueprint for instructors: it allows for a critique of a broken system while simultaneously celebrating the humanity and resilience of the community [35]. By illustrating the creative and strategic ways teachers find resources [44], the show invites students to move from frustrated laughter to a more nuanced understanding of educational policy action.

4. Materials and Methods

This qualitative exploratory study [9] investigates the pedagogical implications of integrating popular culture into the university classroom. Specifically, we examined how student work samples from an eight-week interdisciplinary seminar informed participants' evolving understandings of urban public education in the U.S. The study was guided by two research questions:

RQ1: How does the integration of *Abbott Elementary* as public pedagogy in an undergraduate interdisciplinary seminar inform students' perspectives on urban public education, as articulated in course assignments?

RQ2: In what ways do students describe the relationship between educational policies and the contextual realities of urban schools after applying a critical intersectional multiculturalism approach to analyzing *Abbott Elementary*, as demonstrated in course assignments?

4.1. Context and Course Design

This study was conducted during the Spring 2024 semester at a large, public university in the Midwestern United States. While historically a predominantly white institution (PWI), the university serves an increasingly diverse student body, with approximately 32% of the population representing traditionally underrepresented groups (65% white, 13% Hispanic/Latinx, 11% Black/African American, 4% multiracial, and 3% Asian).

Within this context, Author 1 designed an eight-week Advanced Honors Interdisciplinary seminar titled "Public Education's Possibilities and Predicaments: Exploring Portrayals of Critical Issues in *Abbott Elementary*" [8]. The course served as an "Honors

Experience” open to students from all majors. The primary learning objectives were for students to (1) synthesize information across fields to describe critical issues in education, (2) contrast scholarly research with popular culture representations, and (3) present the results of collaborative, interdisciplinary research in a format accessible to the general public. More details regarding the course design, including a detailed summary of the course tasks that supported these learning objectives, are described elsewhere [8].

As detailed in our literature review, *Abbott Elementary* serves as an intentional counter-narrative to traditional school-based media by disrupting deficit tropes and centering marginalized perspectives. The series was specifically integrated into the seminar design because its hybrid blend of truth and satire offers a distinct “insider” perspective on systemic education issues. By leveraging this specific public pedagogy text, the course design systematically placed popular culture in critical conversation with empirical data and authentic community voices.

Each week focused on a specific policy issue (e.g., funding, gifted programs, teacher burnout). Students engaged with a triad of materials: an empirical research article, a multimedia text featuring authentic community voices (e.g., NPR’s *MindShift* podcast), and a corresponding *Abbott Elementary* episode. This triad of materials was intentionally designed to facilitate a multiperspectival analysis; the scholarly articles supported an understanding of political culture, the multimedia texts often provided insight into audience reception, and the *Abbott Elementary* episodes served as the primary site for textual analysis. To support a multiperspectival analysis [10], 68% of the assigned materials (13 out of 19 articles/book chapters, podcast episodes, and videos) were authored by Black women or centered on the experiences of Black women (see Table 1). Additionally, two Black women scholars whose work we read joined the class as virtual guest speakers to facilitate discussion with students about their research.

Table 1. Overview of course topics, *Abbott Elementary* episodes, and texts/materials.

Topic	<i>Abbott Elementary</i> Episode	Texts/Materials
Urban Teachers and Schools (According to Hollywood)	Pilot	Research Article: “Urban School” Genre in Film (Sociology) News Media: Interview with Quinta Brunson *
Teacher Burnout and Rest as Resistance	S1E2 “Light Bulb”	News Media: Former Teacher Reflects on <i>Abbott Elementary</i> ’s Accuracy * Podcast Episode: Retaining and Sustaining Black Teachers *
School Funding	S1E3 “Wishlist”	Article: School Debt (Economics) Policy Brief: Foundations of School Funding (Education Policy) Practitioner Article: Teaching School Debt (Teacher Pedagogy) Podcast Episode: School Money
Gifted & Talented Programs	S1E6 “Gifted Program”	Research Article: Diverse Students in Gifted Education (Special Education) * Podcast Episode: Recognizing the Genius in All Students *
Charter Schools and School Choice	S2E19 “Festival”	Book Chapters: The Racial Politics of School Choice (Educational Leadership and Policy) * Podcast Episode: Community Response to Charter School Takeovers *
The Sisterhood of Black Women Teachers	S2E21 “Mom”	Research Article: Black Women Pre-Service Teachers (Teacher Preparation) * Podcast Episode: Learning and Unlearning with <i>Abbott Elementary</i> *
Make It Real, But Make It Funny	n/a	News and Magazine Articles: <i>Abbott Elementary</i> Character Profiles *

* Indicates research and/or perspectives from a Black woman.

The class met for 50 min twice weekly. In-class sessions were split between content-focused discussions, using a “Book, Head, Heart” framework [48] to explore students’ conceptual knowledge and personal reactions, and communal viewings of the show to foster an affective, social academic experience [49].

4.2. Participants

Participants were 24 students (of a course enrollment of 25) who provided informed consent after the course concluded and final grades were submitted, to mitigate power dynamics. Participants were 75% white ($n = 18$) and 58% female ($n = 14$). Reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the seminar, 67% ($n = 16$) were Education majors, representing a range of certification areas (e.g., Early Childhood, Elementary, Middle Grades, Secondary, and K-12 special areas), while 33% ($n = 8$) represented diverse fields including Criminal Justice, Computer Science, and Geology. Participants spanned all years of study: 25% ($n = 6$) first-year, 33% ($n = 8$) sophomores, 21% ($n = 5$) juniors, and 21% ($n = 5$) seniors (see Table 2). Initial familiarity with *Abbott Elementary* varied: 42% ($n = 10$) had never seen the show prior to the course, 25% ($n = 6$) had watched occasionally, and 33% ($n = 8$) had watched frequently.

Table 2. Participant demographics.

Student	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Year of Study	Major/Program of Study
Allison	Female	African American, white	Sophomore	Early Childhood Education
Bartleby	Female	white	First-Year	Middle Level Education, Psychology Minor
Bella	Female	white, Hispanic	First-Year	Elementary Education
Camden	Nonbinary	white	First Year	Geology
Clark	Female	white	First-Year	Criminal Justice
Don	Male	white	Senior	Computer Science
Faye	Nonbinary	white	Sophomore	Early Childhood Education
Graham D.	Male	white	First-Year	Computer Science
Graham R.	Cisgender Male	white	Sophomore	English Education
Karson	Female	Black/African American	Junior	English Writing and Rhetoric
Kasey	Female	white	Sophomore	Elementary Education
Katie	Female	white	Junior	English Education
KM	Female	Asian, white	Senior	Art Education
Lexi	Female	white	First-Year	Mathematics Education
Luke	Male	white	Sophomore	Economics, History
Marco	Male	white	Senior	Actuarial Science
Molly	--	--	Junior	Middle Level Education
Naomi	Female	white	Sophomore	Middle Level Education
Poppy	Female	white	Junior	Elementary Education
Spencer	Male	white	Senior	Accounting
Stacey	Female	white	Junior	Elementary Education
Texas	Male	South Asian (Indian)	Senior	Music Education
Tiffany	Female	white	Sophomore	Elementary Education
Willa	Female	white	Sophomore	Early Childhood Education

Note: All names are pseudonyms. All demographics (gender, race/ethnicity, etc.) were self-identified by participants.

4.3. Data Collection

The primary data sources for this analysis were students' Initial and Final Reflections. In the Initial Reflection, completed during Week 1, students articulated their baseline perceptions of urban public schools, the causes of perceived issues, and the roles of various stakeholders, serving as an assessment of their "decoding" positions [15]. In Week 7, students revisited their initial responses to complete their Final Reflections. In these, students described how their perceptions had evolved, citing specific evidence from course materials to support their shifts in perspective.

To mitigate the structural risk of demand characteristics, wherein students might perform an expected narrative of change to please the instructor, the grading of these assignments was completely uncoupled from the evaluation of student perspectives. Instead, reflections were entirely self-assessed by the students themselves using a transparent rubric based on three criteria: completion, depth of evidence, and analytical complexity (see Figure 1). This self-assessment model shifted the focus from ideological compliance to structural rigor, reducing the likelihood of participants fabricating an expected conceptual arc purely for evaluation purposes.

HON 205: Public Education's Possibilities and Predicaments- Exploring Portrayals of Critical Issues in *Abbott Elementary*

Personal Reflections-Initial (Week 1)

Directions: In 1-2 single-spaced pages, reflect on your current perceptions of urban public schools. You may use the questions below as a guide to prompt your thinking. You may draw on your personal experiences, what you have seen portrayed in the media (news, TV, films, books, etc.), and/or what you have learned about in previous coursework. You may respond to as many as you like, but the goal is for you to explore your ideas in depth. The primary purposes of this reflection are (1) to activate your prior knowledge and beliefs and (2) to have a record of your thinking at the beginning of the course.

- How would you define "public education"?
- Why is public education important in our society?
- When you think of urban public schools, what do you think of?
- How would you describe the students who attend urban public schools?
- How would you describe the teachers, staff, and administrators that work at urban public schools?
- What do you believe are the most pressing issues facing public schools, in general?
- What do you believe are the most pressing issues facing urban public schools, specifically?
- What do you believe causes these issues?
- How might these issues be addressed?
- What is the role of students, families/communities, teachers, administrators/school leaders, politicians, and the general public in addressing these issues? Who is or should be responsible?

After writing your reflection, complete the [Self-Assessment Rubric](#) to assess both your reflection process and product.

Self-Assessment Rubric

To be completed when submitting your reflection.

Areas for Growth <i>Next time, try...</i>	Criteria <i>Standards to meet for this task</i>	Areas of Strength <i>It was effective when you...</i>	Grade <i>(Highlight One)</i>
Use this area to provide specific evidence of what you could do better to meet the criteria For example, "Writing more than 1 page"	Completion I wrote a 1-2 page (single-spaced) reflection. I answered multiple prompts from the provided list	Use this area to provide specific evidence of what you did that meets or exceeds the criteria For example, "Wrote a full 2 pages"	Exceeds: 10 Meets: 9 Approaches: 8 Below: 7
Use this area to provide specific evidence of what you could do better to meet the criteria For example, "Explaining why I think the way I do with more evidence"	Evidence I provided specific evidence from my personal experiences, media portrayals, and/or prior coursework to explain my thinking.	Use this area to provide specific evidence of what you did that meets or exceeds the criteria For example, "Included multiple types of evidence, including my own personal experiences and previous coursework"	Exceeds: 10 Meets: 9 Approaches: 8 Below: 7
Use this area to provide specific evidence of what you could do better to meet the criteria For example, "Including topics or concepts that I am not familiar with and asking questions that I hope to learn more about"	Complexity I included questions I have, concepts I don't know much about, and/or areas where I may lack personal experience or connection.	Use this area to provide specific evidence of what you did that meets or exceeds the criteria For example, "Identified ways my personal experiences may have impacted my ability to understand the issue deeply"	Exceeds: 10 Meets: 9 Approaches: 8 Below: 7

Overall Grade: ____/30

Exceeds: >27 Meets: 24-26 Approaches: 21-23 Below: <20

Grading process: Each criteria is evaluated against the expectations and receives a grade of Exceeds/Meets/Approaching/Below. The grades for all criteria are then added together for an overall grade.

(a)

HON 205: Public Education's Possibilities and Predicaments- Exploring Portrayals of Critical Issues in *Abbott Elementary*

Personal Reflections-Final (Week 7)

Directions: In 1-2 single-spaced pages, reflect on how your perceptions of urban public schools have changed as a result of your engagement in this course. You may use the questions and sentence starters below as a guide to prompt your thinking. You **must** include specific connections to course materials (readings, podcasts, guest speakers, in-class discussions, *Abbott Elementary* episodes, etc.) to support your reflection. You may respond to as many as you like, but the goal is for you to explore your ideas in depth. The primary purposes of this reflection are (1) to summarize your learning and (2) to analyze how your thinking has changed over time.

- I used to think...but now I know...
- I used to wonder...but now I understand...
- I didn't realize...and now I'm wondering...
- How would you define "public education"?
- Why is public education important in our society?
- When you think of urban public schools, what do you think of?
- How would you describe the students who attend urban public schools?
- How would you describe the teachers, staff, and administrators that work at urban public schools?
- What do you believe are the most pressing issues facing public schools, in general?
- What do you believe are the most pressing issues facing urban public schools, specifically?
- What do you believe causes these issues?
- How might these issues be addressed?
- What is the role of students, families/communities, teachers, administrators/school leaders, politicians, and the general public in addressing these issues? Who is or should be responsible?

After writing your reflection, complete the [Self-Assessment Rubric](#) to assess both your reflection process and product.

Self-Assessment Rubric

To be completed when submitting your reflection.

Areas for Growth <i>Next time, try...</i>	Criteria <i>Standards to meet for this task</i>	Areas of Strength <i>It was effective when you...</i>	Grade <i>(Highlight One)</i>
Use this area to provide specific evidence of what you could do better to meet the criteria For example, "Writing more than 1 page"	Completion I wrote a 1-2 page (single-spaced) reflection. I answered multiple prompts from the provided list	Use this area to provide specific evidence of what you did that meets or exceeds the criteria For example, "Wrote a full 2 pages"	Exceeds: 10 Meets: 9 Approaches: 8 Below: 7
Use this area to provide specific evidence of what you could do better to meet the criteria For example, "Including specific course materials that have supported my thinking"	Evidence I provided specific evidence from the course (readings, podcasts, guest speakers, in-class discussions, <i>Abbott Elementary</i> episodes, etc.) to explain my thinking.	Use this area to provide specific evidence of what you did that meets or exceeds the criteria For example, "Included multiple examples of course materials that have impacted my thinking"	Exceeds: 10 Meets: 9 Approaches: 8 Below: 7
Use this area to provide specific evidence of what you could do better to meet the criteria For example, "Including topics or concepts that I hope to learn more about"	Complexity I included questions I have, concepts I want to learn more about, and/or areas where I may lack personal experience or connection.	Use this area to provide specific evidence of what you did that meets or exceeds the criteria For example, "Identified lingering questions I still have and want to investigate further"	Exceeds: 10 Meets: 9 Approaches: 8 Below: 7

Overall Grade: ____/30

Exceeds: >27 Meets: 24-26 Approaches: 21-23 Below: <20

Grading process: Each criteria is evaluated against the expectations and receives a grade of Exceeds/Meets/Approaching/Below. The grades for all criteria are then added together for an overall grade.

(b)

Figure 1. Detailed assignment descriptions and self-assessment rubrics provided to students: (a) Initial Reflection. (b) Final Reflection.

4.4. Data Analysis

Authors 1 and 2 conducted thematic analysis using the constant comparative method [50] following an iterative, fluid progression. All data were managed and manually coded using Microsoft Excel. To ensure analytical precision, the unit of analysis was operationalized as a complete thought or idea, which typically manifested as a single sentence or a discrete block of a few sentences within the reflection essays. Quantified claims reported in the findings typically represent the explicit frequency of these distinct coding units containing specific themes across the data corpus.

The analytical process began with an independent coding phase, where each author conducted open coding on matched participant pairs, analyzing the Initial and Final Reflection of a single student together as a discrete data unit. This paired strategy allowed the authors to trace structural shifts indigenously within each participant's trajectory without being swayed by generalized cohort trends. The authors each generate inductive codes directly from the student text alongside deductive codes derived from course syllabi topics and Hall's [15] three decoding positions. Rather than relying on a static mathematical intercoder reliability coefficient, the research team transitioned into a rigorous process of negotiated consensus. The authors met weekly to compare their independent coding sheets, audit discrepant definitions, and collectively deliberate until achieving 100% conceptual alignment on all paired units, carefully documenting these conceptual boundaries in iterative researcher memos.

During the subsequent refinement phase, this collaboratively revised coding scheme was recursively applied back to previous text subsets to ensure consistency. This open coding continued across the reflection pairs until the authors established categorical saturation, which was explicitly judged to have occurred when successive rounds of text analysis generated zero new codes, sub-categories, or modifications to the existing scheme. Once saturation was established, the authors collaboratively executed axial coding to identify structural connections among the open codes, collapsing them into the major thematic categories mapped out in Figure 2 to illustrate the overarching patterns in students' conceptual trajectories.

4.5. Researcher Positionality

We approached this study through a lens of critical self-reflection, utilizing Milner's [51] framework of "seen, unseen, and unforeseen" dangers. As the course instructor, Author 1 occupied a position of institutional power. This proximity carried the "seen" danger of confirmation bias and the "unseen" danger of over-interpreting student voices through a personal lens, given her positionality as a white woman and her experiences teaching in urban settings.

We addressed these structural risks through two vital safeguards: the uncoupling of instructor grading via student self-assessment rubrics, and a collaborative data-auditing partnership. Author 2, an advocate for multilingualism, multiculturalism, and equity policies in education, served as a graduate research assistant unaffiliated with the course design, implementation, or grading. He provided an independent, critical perspective during data interrogation. By systematically auditing Author 1's interpretations during the matched-pair coding analysis, Author 2 challenged potential instances of confirmation bias, ensuring that emergent themes strictly reflected the students' authentic conceptual arcs rather than the instructor's curricular expectations.

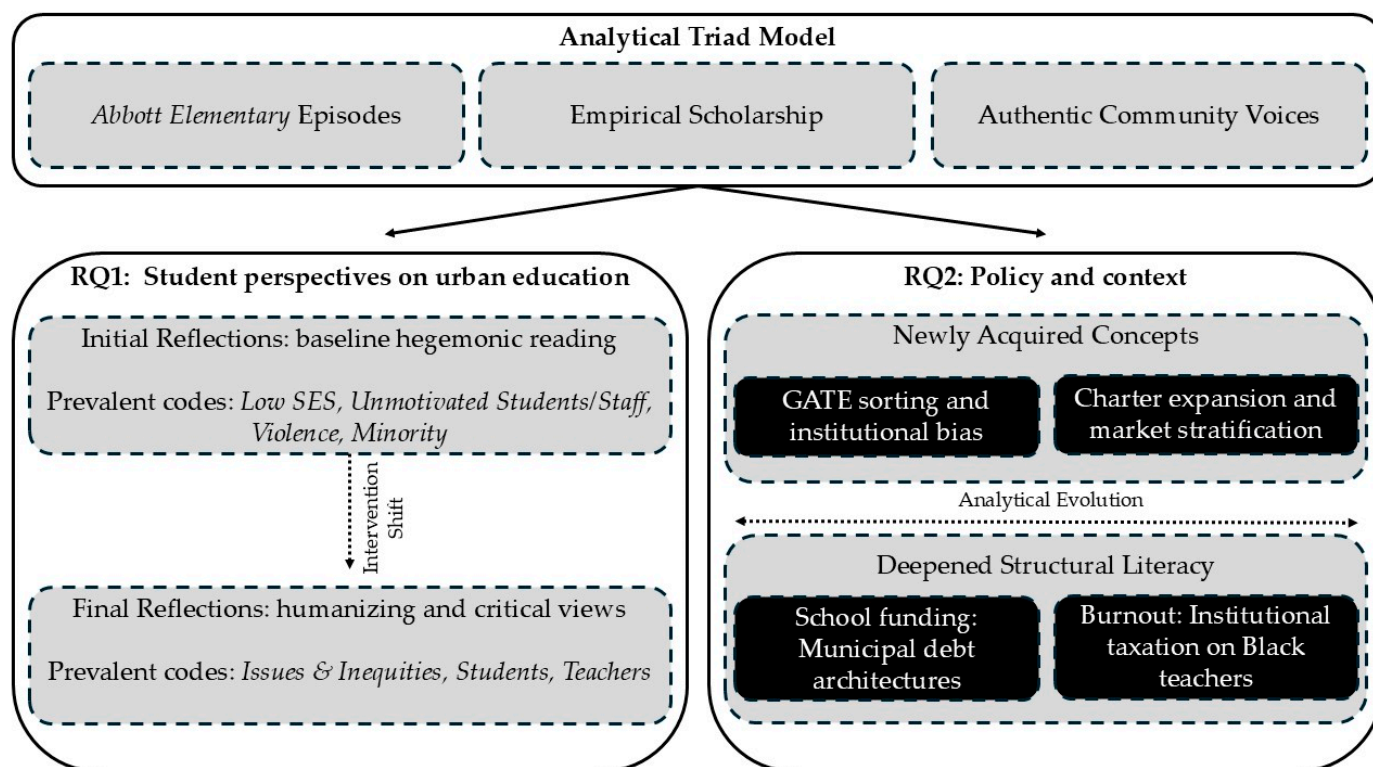


Figure 2. Overview of qualitative findings: Student conceptual trajectories across public pedagogy interventions.

5. Findings

Our analysis suggests that integrating *Abbott Elementary* as public pedagogy informed shifts in students' perspectives on urban U.S. public education. These movements trended from baseline views aligned with hegemonic, deficit-based narratives toward final reflections that were notably more nuanced, humanizing, and structurally focused. Furthermore, we observed qualitative changes in how students described the relationship between educational policies and the contextual realities of urban schools, including the acquisition of new policy concepts and an expanded empirical evidence base. Across assignments, participants moved away from unexamined impressions, instead placing *Abbott Elementary* in critical conversation with academic and multimedia texts. We present our findings organized by research question.

To guide the reader through the shifts in student discourse documented across this seminar, Figure 2 provides a visual overview of our qualitative findings. This conceptual roadmap explicitly traces how our analytical triad of materials mediated students' decodings, detailing both the realignment of baseline perspectives under RQ1 and the acquisition of macro-level policy literacy under RQ2. This framework provides a structural anchor for the descriptive data and emergent themes presented in the subsequent sections.

5.1. RQ1: *Abbott Elementary* as Public Pedagogy and Student Perspectives

To answer RQ1, we analyzed data from students' Initial and Final Reflections to track how they characterized urban schools, students, teachers, and communities. At the beginning of the course, baseline views predominantly aligned with dominant, hegemonic, deficit-based narratives, which participants attributed to personal assumptions and traditional media forms, highlighting how popular culture socializes the public regarding social realities [3,10].

5.1.1. Baseline Perspectives: Articulating Hegemonic and Deficit Narratives

In the Initial Reflections, student discourse was heavily characterized by codes such as *Low SES* (18 occurrences), *Unmotivated Students/Staff* (7 occurrences), *Violence* (11 occurrences), and *Minority* (10 occurrences). Participants frequently relied on a cultural vocabulary of risk, danger, and deficiency, driven by external media consumption or localized anxieties.

The first prominent pattern was the characterization of urban school environments as unsafe, chaotic spaces viewed through a lens of surveillance rather than communities of learning. For example, Clark shared her immediate mental imagery:

“I think about fights breaking out, graffiti in the bathrooms, and bullying in the halls ... When I think of public schools, specifically those in urban areas, I think ‘unsafe.’ These larger schools may have more security guards, more cameras, and more places to hide, but all I can think about is how there are so many students and so few staff members to be able to notice the warning signs before something happens”.

Similarly, Lexi noted that urban schools have a high risk of gang violence that can impact the safety of the school, explicitly attributing this framework to “what I see in movies and TV shows or incidents that pop up in the news”. Naomi recalled a media text where an urban campus “installed security systems when entering ... like the ones they use at the airport” due to contraband and intense fighting, which generated professional anxiety and discouraged her from pursuing employment in urban settings.

The second baseline pattern involved deficit-based depictions of students and staff as lacking agency or motivation. Descriptions frequently flattened internal stakeholders, as Camden observed, envisioning “diminished educational quality and students/staff who are overall unmotivated to go above and beyond”. While Camden shifted blame away from individual character, the reflection remained anchored to an assumed lack of drive. Faye noted that these assumptions are directly manufactured by media representations marketing urban youth as “lazy and not putting any effort into their education”. This contributed to a broader assumption that urban systems suffer from “less parent engagement and student motivation” (Stacey), trapping families in a “generational cycle of poverty” (Faye). Even when students introduced structural components from prior coursework, descriptions remained bleak. Kasey noted that poverty is an adverse childhood experience (ACE) and that cities contain “food deserts”, but admitted she relied on “the news or social media”, leaving her perceptions “flawed or exaggerated”.

This conflation of demographic diversity with financial and systemic deprivation was a recurring motif. Students frequently used demographic identifiers as implicit synonyms for failure. Lexi associated urban public schools with “minority students and students from families who struggle financially”, while Molly envisioned “a very diverse population (predominantly not white) and students from low-income families”. Poppy explicitly identified urban student bodies as “low SES and Black students”.

Texas argued that because families are “scrambling to put food on the table”, children must “shift their focus to supporting their family instead of learning”, while Bella noted that low-income areas “unfortunately continue to remain made up of minorities, specifically”. Kasey summarized this by visualizing a space where “primarily POC [people of color] students” attend schools that are “underfunded, and probably understaffed”, a sentiment shared by Marco, who stated that urban campuses have “predominantly black student bodies, are massively underfunded, and frequently have low standardized test scores”. Marco traced this framework to popular culture texts ranging “from *Lean on Me* (1989) to *Key & Peele* comedy sketches”.

Finally, this baseline deficit framework frequently manifested as a paternalistic “teacher-as-savior” or “broken home” narrative, where the domestic environment was framed as a site of instability that must be overcome by a sacrificial educator. Bartleby wrote that teachers must “serve as role models ... to all students who may not necessarily have that kind of support system elsewhere”. Graham D. imagined that behavioral issues are “not worked on and resolved at home” because low-income parents “need to work more than one job” and are unavailable. When looking for models of how to address these imagined domestic deficits, students frequently turned to commercial media texts that celebrate savior teachers, as Katie outlined:

“Especially for urban students who may be experiencing very real issues at home, a teacher is an extremely important figure. For some students, a teacher may be their only adult role model ... Examples of this can be seen in the media. For example, in the show *Glee*, many of the students are struggling with difficult issues at home. However, when they enter the school they are able to stop thinking about it and join a community. This community is created by their passionate teacher (Mr. Shue) ... [Another] example I often think of in the media is Mrs. Honey from *Matilda* ... she must be patient and understanding to help Matilda understand her gift on her own”.

This archetype of the heroic teacher intervening in a “broken family” (Molly) or supporting students from “underprivileged families that may not have the best support for them at home” (KM) was a cornerstone of the initial data. Naomi assumed that “students may only know violence because of the way they grew up,” a view shaped by family stories and media portrayals. Poppy reinforced this framework by quoting university professors who suggested that “those are the kids we need to help just a little bit more and it will solve so many problems,” while assuming that those same students “must not get that [attention] at home”. Stacey supported this by noting a clinical placement where her cooperating teacher remarked that parents “may not see school as the top priority”. This deficit-saturated baseline provided the critical entry point for the intervention of *Abbott Elementary* as a public pedagogy text.

5.1.2. Transformed Perspectives: Articulating Humanizing and Critical Views

In the Final Reflections, we identified an analytical pivot toward humanizing, asset-based perspectives, with codes such as *Issues & Inequities* (31 occurrences), *Students* (6 occurrences), and *Teachers* (15 occurrences) becoming much more prevalent. Rather than viewing urban schools through a monolithic lens of deficiency, students explicitly cited *Abbott Elementary* (51 occurrences) as a vital pedagogical tool that allowed them to deconstruct their previous assumptions. As Bartleby noted, “through watching *Abbott Elementary* and our in-class discussions, I have learned more about what exactly occurs in urban public schools, the students who attend them, and the teachers and administration that work at them”. This shift manifested in two primary ways: the humanization of school communities through the subversion of individualist tropes, and the acquisition of a critical, systemic vocabulary.

The first major sub-theme within the Final Reflection data was the direct dismantling of the paternalistic “white savior” and “broken home” tropes. By engaging with *Abbott Elementary*’s satirical style, students recognized how traditional media had pathologized urban youth and exceptionalized individual teachers. Texas articulated this shift directly:

“However, through this show, I realized that a lot of media has skewed my understanding of what urban school settings are like. Starting off, the kids were just like any other batch of normal kids with some differences in cultural background. They were not portrayed in a sense that made me feel bad for the

teacher in any regard. The show also did a great job portraying a wide array of kids by portraying goofy kids, nerdy kids, and kids of all different backgrounds to normalize that the kids in *Abbott* are like the kids in any other public school. The show also does a great job of breaking the idea of the ‘savior’ teacher and even makes fun of the concept ... The teachers are shown that they want the best for their kids but they also want to connect with them as well instead of ‘saving’ them”.

By breaking these stereotypes, the show’s representation allowed students to challenge implicit biases regarding student behavior and parent engagement. Kasey reflected on this realization, noting, “having those things [deficits] be the only things that pop into my head when I think of urban public schools is not reflective of all the value and talent that students who attend these schools bring into the classroom”. Seeing families framed as collaborators shifted their asset-based thinking; KM observed that after watching the show, she felt a need to be “more gracious towards urban families and what they can bring to the table”, finding the scripted mockumentary to feel profoundly real.

Similarly, the show’s demographic composition served as an empirical counterweight. Molly appreciated that the series “breaks those stereotypes by showing a cast of mostly Black teachers and administrators and an all-Black school of students that ... are just getting to be kids”. This humanizing lens altered how students perceived the professional life of educators; Faye observed that rather than encountering “the common depiction of disengaged teachers who have given up”, the show offered “effective and caring teachers who value their students and job ... despite not necessarily having the materials and resources that they should have”.

Willa echoed this shift, admitting that before the intervention, she “often only saw urban public-school teachers as worn out and hopeless”, but subsequently came to appreciate teachers “that are doing everything they possibly can”. Ultimately, the text served as an accessible reference point, or as Naomi summarized, “a great example for me of what an urban public school looks like, both the positives and the negatives”, validating that these schools “still can have an incredibly positive impact on a student’s life”.

The second thematic shift involved students abandoning localized, individualistic explanations for educational failure and adopting a structurally literate perspective focused on institutional configurations. In their Final Reflections, students actively historicized educational inequality, identifying policy decisions, capital distribution, and systemic underfunding as the primary drivers of school struggles. Bartleby demonstrated this cognitive restructuring clearly:

“Now when I think of urban public schools, I think about how there is a funding issue and inequities in the education system that are in place because of systematic flaws that have existed for quite some time ... I used to not understand why teachers in Chicago Public Schools would constantly be striking, but with this new acquired knowledge, I now understand the frustration that urban public educators can experience due to low funding and the systemic issues that exist within the entire institution of education”.

This movement from a deficit-based orientation to a systemic one allowed students to unpack complex issues like teacher burnout as structural consequences rather than personal failures. Clark analyzed this structural relationship by referencing the course’s public pedagogy:

“After less than 2 months in this class, I now see how my thoughts were incorrect and lacked a common understanding of urban public schools ... As we saw in an earlier episode of *Abbott Elementary*, teachers, like Janine, often feel responsible to ‘fix’ the school themselves ... The episode of *Abbott Elementary* we

watched, titled ‘Light Bulb’, really highlighted the impact this mindset can have on the rest of the school community. This episode did an awesome job portraying how the issue of underfunding can contribute to teacher burnout ... It allowed me to look at the problem as it affects teachers, as opposed to my old view of just looking at the issue in relation to the students”.

By utilizing a critical framework paired with multimedia texts, students were less likely to blame marginalized communities for structural hardships. Graham D. noted that “with a combination of the articles and podcasts, and the surprisingly accurate *Abbott Elementary* episodes, I feel like a lot of my perceptions have changed”. Students came to view the educational system as an integrated network; KM argued that because “the history of education is founded on unequal footing ... it is impossible to blame just any one thing. The system itself needs to be reformed”.

Marco advanced this critique, connecting outcomes directly to macro-level institutions, noting that most issues are systemic, encompassing the “mistreatment of Black and other minority students and teachers through inadequate structuring” and “funding issues created by uncaring politicians and capitalist institutions” where community members “are trapped by the same systemic abuses that kept their school from improving to begin with”.

By confronting these barriers through comedy, the intervention supported students in “normalizing the idea of urban schools while also pointing out the many systematic issues that are occurring within them” (Texas). Rather than concluding with a sense of fatalism, students synthesized these realities through collective resilience, as Kasey summarized: “I now realize that it is important to also recognize the good ... and focus on what they do have, not what they don’t”.

5.2. RQ2: Multiperspectival Analysis of Policy and Context

To address RQ2, we analyzed how students identified, conceptualized, and historicized specific structural mechanisms within education, revealing shifts in both topical awareness and analytical complexity.

5.2.1. The Acquisition of New Policy Concepts

Between their Initial and Final Reflections, students began to describe critical educational issues that were absent from their baseline responses. These newly acquired understandings regarding the systemic inequities embedded within Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) and the socio-structural consequences of charter school expansion and “school choice” directly mirrored the focal policy topics embedded within *Abbott Elementary* and its corresponding scholarly pairings. This trend highlights the pedagogical utility of the show’s episodic focus as a curricular driver that prompts students to build structural literacy and map systemic policy architectures onto the lived daily experiences of urban school communities.

A critical issue uniquely identified by students in the Final Reflections (14 occurrences), and entirely unmentioned by any participant in their Initial Reflection (0 occurrences), was the structural inequity governing gifted education. Because GATE programming served as a focal topic, students’ Final Reflections demonstrated a sophisticated synthesis of our analytical triad: Ford and colleagues’ [52] empirical research, a virtual guest lecture from Dr. Donna Ford, a *MindShift* podcast episode [53] highlighting Dr. Gholdy Muhammad’s asset-based framework, and a textual analysis of *Abbott Elementary*’s “Gifted Program” episode (Season 1, Episode 6).

In their Final Reflections, students did not view gifted tracking as a neutral measure of merit; instead, they analyzed it as a sorting mechanism skewed by institutional bias. Clark synthesized the empirical literature to unpack this systemic sorting:

“I was not aware that there are many inequities that exist within gifted programs and that many minority groups aren’t given the same access to them as other groups of students. For example, in Dr. Ford’s article ‘Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students in Gifted Education: Recruitment and Retention Issues’, she talks about how African American, Hispanic/Latino, and American Indian students are poorly represented in gifted education. This has to do with a variety of factors, including flawed recruitment, stereotypical thinking, and problems with standardized testing”.

By placing the literature in conversation with our guest speaker, students recognized that these policy outcomes persist even within predominantly minoritized school spaces. Kasey highlighted how subjective administrative policies create inequitable contextual realities, noting that “GATE program placement is still an issue because of the method of placement, which is primarily through tests or teacher recommendation” where biases can play a role.

Furthermore, students applied an intersectional lens to examine the psychological and affective realities that these policy configurations impose on minoritized youth. Willa linked the structural findings of Ford and colleagues [52] to the lived trauma of academic marginalization, noting that talents are often unrecognized by teachers of the majority culture, leading to lower retention rates and imposter syndrome.

While empirical texts and guest lectures provided the structural data, *Abbott Elementary* served as the vital public pedagogy text that allowed students to witness the localized, relational consequences of these policies, as Faye operationalized her textual analysis:

“One issue that *Abbott Elementary* depicts quite well is the idea of a gifted program. In the show we see the creation of a gifted program that is meant to support academically talented students ... but as is shown in the episode, gifted programs as they are usually crafted, end up causing more harm than good for many students whether they are in the gifted program or not. Often gifted programs in schools target academic success, and do not take into consideration other forms of genius ... In *Abbott Elementary* we see this initially, with the gifted program being comprised of academically advanced students, who were able to participate in more engaging and creative lessons, while students who were not put into the gifted program were unable to participate. Quickly it becomes apparent that other students are being negatively impacted by the gifted program”.

A parallel and equally notable paradigm shift occurred in students’ conceptualizations of school privatization. In the Initial Reflections, only three students mentioned charter schools or school choice (3 occurrences), and their descriptions were restricted to localized, surface-level personal observations, such as Luke noting Chicago’s “convoluted charter and magnet system”, Stacey observing enrollment disparities in her clinical context, and Texas demonstrating an initial awareness that charter schools are “very well off and well-funded” while neighborhood public schools languish.

In their Final Reflections, however, 17 different students explicitly identified charter school expansion and market-driven “school choice” policies as critical challenges in urban education (29 occurrences). Camden highlighted this foundational conceptual acquisition: “What I didn’t understand before taking this course is that there are different types of public schools including magnet and charter schools; access to these different options is a hot topic in modern-day education debates referred to as ‘school choice’”.

By analyzing empirical policy texts, students moved past treating “school choice” as a neutral consumer option, instead historicizing it as an active mechanism of racial and economic stratification. Graham D. traced the genealogy of these modern policies, noting

that “school choice was introduced as a way to keep schools segregated for white families” following *Brown v. Board of Education*, concluding that it places underprivileged kids at a systemic disadvantage. Karson similarly connected these historical frameworks to macro-level economic realities, admitting that before the seminar, she “would have never really considered the impacts of the ‘market’ and its influence on school success and productivity, especially in urban schools”.

To ground these macroeconomic and historical critiques, students turned to *Abbott Elementary*’s Season 2 charter school storyline alongside community-centered podcasts (26 occurrences), allowing them to deconstruct the specific operational mechanisms that privatized entities use to exploit underfunded public infrastructure. Graham R. noted that this pairing detailed the “specific mechanisms of private education”, while Willa outlined structural disparities with high granularity, noting that charter schools lack teacher union protections, do not require teacher certification, are not required to enroll all neighborhood students, and can actively remove disruptive students.

This public pedagogy intervention also allowed the three students who possessed baseline knowledge to expand their understanding, moving from passive observation to critical, systemic analysis. For example, Luke evolved his understanding of the Chicago school landscape, realizing how charter models turn public spaces into “semi-public semi-private” institutions. Stacey similarly connected her clinical observations back to broader market dynamics:

“In the initial reflection, I talked about how for my clinicals ... families can pick where they send their children ... This causes an enrollment disparity between schools. As schools become more unequal, racial and socio-economic problems grow. According to the article ‘School Choice and Who Has a Right to Choose’, ‘school choice policies today are far less focused on achieving racial diversity than they are on competition in the marketplace’ ... Before taking this class, I didn’t know the difference between the types of schools but after engaging in the material I was able to gain a better understanding”.

Finally, Texas synthesized the entire multi-perspective arc of the course, utilizing *Abbott Elementary*’s narrative framework to detail how privatization actively decimates neighborhood schools through aggressive marketing that siphons off public funding, utilizes lottery systems that exclude local youth, strips teacher autonomy via rigid non-union contract restructuring, and enforces exclusionary expulsion metrics. By tracking this structural critique, the data illustrates that integrating public pedagogy supported students in bridging the gap between entertaining media texts and complex institutional literacy.

5.2.2. From Individualized Issues to Systemic Complexity

For issues that remained central across both the baseline and concluding reflections, specifically *Funding/Underfunding* (52 occurrences in Initial Reflections, 41 occurrences in Final Reflections) and *Teacher Shortage & Burnout* (20 occurrences in Initial Reflections, 22 occurrences in Final Reflections), our analysis identified a qualitative shift in student conceptualization away from abstract mentions or anecdotal accounts toward highly nuanced structural articulations.

The most frequently identified critical issue in students’ Initial Reflections was school funding, with 21 out of 24 participants highlighting it as a primary challenge facing urban public systems. However, these initial observations were heavily bounded by personal background, uncritical media consumption, or a superficial understanding of state resource distribution. Students often cited infrastructure decay or general government

apathy without connecting these symptoms to broader policy mechanisms; for example, Clark drew on personal high school observations to frame administrative misallocation:

“Another common issue that I think about when I picture an urban public school, is the issue of underfunding ... I witnessed at my own school just how little money goes towards keeping the building from falling apart. For example, at my high school, there was a hole in the ceiling that was constantly dripping dirty, mucky water onto the floors. It stunk up the hallway and even caused a couple people to slip. This hole was left unattended to for half a year before it got fixed. In that time, the school finished a brand-new gymnasium, locker room, and weight room expansion that cost millions of dollars, which just shows where their priorities lie”.

Other students relied on uncritical engagement with popular or social media to anchor their initial understandings of resource scarcity. Poppy noted her familiarity with *Abbott Elementary*’s setting, stating that schools “don’t get enough money and recognition” and that teachers “constantly adapt” to structural breakdown. Similarly, Spencer focused on teacher compensation, stating it was difficult for teachers to stay passionate “when they are making almost nothing”, while Texas envisioned a cyclical “self-fulfilling prophecy” where low funding leads to low test scores. Willa observed identical patterns on social media platforms where teachers “try to find applications for grants” because their schools lack basic purchasing power.

When initially prompted to explain the underlying causes of this underfunding, approximately half of the participants attempted a structural explanation, though their analysis remained limited to the mechanism of local property taxes. While pieces of this narrative were accurate, their use of the property-tax framework frequently pathologized low-income communities by implying an inescapable cycle of poverty and environmental deficit. Bella detailed this circular neighborhood narrative:

“Depending on the area surrounding the school, the more or less funding a school may receive due to property taxes. It is one big circle, students attend a poorly funded school, do not receive the best education because they don’t have access to certain resources ... We would commonly discuss that the circle of the neighborhood does not have good schools so people take their money elsewhere which leads to increasing home values in certain areas which means more property taxes for those schools and less for the schools that aren’t good ... It is one big endless cycle”.

Camden mirrored this exact framework, noting that “wealthier areas will receive more funding ... which then becomes a cycle because poor areas with deficient education will not be able to increase property values”. Faye similarly summarized that state funding relies on property taxes, while Graham R. focused on the inequity of community fundraising gaps. Katie, KM, Molly, and Tiffany similarly concluded their Initial Reflections by framing the reliance on local taxes as a highly subjective, regional disadvantage.

While school funding remained the most universally cited critical issue in students’ Final Reflections (retaining 21 out of 24 participants), their descriptions exhibited an analytical shift. Rather than viewing financial scarcity as a neutral by-product of local poverty, students identified it as an engineered outcome of long-standing systemic flaws. As Bartleby reflected, “Now when I think of urban public schools, I think about how there is a funding issue and inequities in the education system that are in place because of systematic flaws that have existed for quite some time”.

The primary catalyst for this conceptual shift was the introduction of the concept of municipal school debt, a structural mechanism entirely missing from their initial perspectives. By pairing *Abbott Elementary*’s localized depictions with empirical exposés on

educational debt architectures, students realized that modern school funding is deeply entangled with commercial financial markets and predatory institutional lending. Clark detailed this analytical evolution:

“One example of an issue I misunderstood is the issue of underfunding. At the beginning of the semester, I simply thought that schools just didn’t have the resources to adequately support their students ... I now realize that there is a lot more to it. For example, I didn’t know schools have their own credit scores and have to apply for loans via these credit scores ... Another fact relating to school funding that shocked me was the fact that only about 10% of funding comes from the federal government, and a majority of the rest comes from property taxes in the school’s district ... You’d think the government would see the issue with this and provide more funding to more struggling schools, but they don’t”.

Crucially, this structural literacy helped to reorient how students evaluated solutions to educational inequity. Armed with an understanding of systemic debt, participants abandoned the naïve assumption that merely “throwing money” at a back-logged district would automatically optimize student outcomes, recognizing that underfunded schools are forced into an endless cycle of playing financial catch-up, redirecting new capital toward historical liabilities and private Wall Street interest fees rather than innovative classroom pedagogy. Graham D. unpacked this realization:

“In regards to school funding, I learned that throwing money at the issue is not the correct solution, as I had believed previously. I thought that if schools could just have more money, then they would be able to lift themselves up ... Big boosts in spending were not resulting in improvement of student achievement. Throwing money at the problem doesn’t work, because that money is often put towards schools trying to ‘play catch up’. These schools are having to put that money towards resources like textbooks—resources that suburban schools already have had for decades”.

Karson mapped this structural catch-up directly onto our Week 3 core readings, identifying corporate exploitation as a driver of school failure, noting that poorer schools pay higher interest and fees to Wall Street banks, trapping them in an endless cycle where increased funding fails to reach the school itself. Katie similarly leveraged our podcast resources to articulate the need for macro-structural reform over localized grants, explaining that low-income school funding from grants frequently goes toward paying off debts or supplying basic physical resources rather than improving academic success.

Lexi applied this macro-level lens to critique the predatory grading metrics used to determine school creditworthiness, while Marco explicitly detailed the temporary, compounding nature of emergency municipal loans that force schools to “pay some of its budget out next year to its debtors and keeping the schools poor”. Finally, Tiffany integrated these insights to demonstrate a revised worldview, moving past her initial regional deficit lens to a robust policy critique based on the NPR podcast, concluding that “school funding issue is a lot more complex than it appears to be. This is not something that can just be solved with extra funds”.

A similar change occurred in how students conceptualized *Teacher Shortage & Burnout*. In their Initial Reflections, 11 students identified labor shortages as a critical crisis, yet they frequently understood the issue through localized, personal frustrations or immediate post-pandemic fatigue. Initial Reflections often attributed the shortage to individual student behavior, generic stress, or a generalized public devaluation of the field, as Bartleby articulated this comprehensive baseline:

“In general, I believe that the most pressing issue facing public schools is the massive teacher shortage ... This is causing teachers to flee the profession ...

These issues include the lack of support in their job, feeling emotionally and mentally exhausted, low wages, large class sizes ... When it comes to the teachers, especially at urban public schools, I believe that they are very underappreciated because in the news, the one distinct thing that I can remember about Chicago Public Schools is that it seems that their teachers are constantly on strike. I am not really sure their exact reasoning for their strikes, but I assume it has to do with their tough working conditions”.

Graham D. framed this early understanding around pandemic stress, noting teachers were “overworked and compensated poorly” during remote instruction, while Poppy expressed severe frustration regarding structural barriers, venting about her experiences entering the labor substitute pool, wondering why administration couldn’t easily raise salaries: “right now, all I’m thinking is they’re too lazy to get any work done to fix these issues”.

In the Final Reflections, the prevalence of this theme grew slightly to 13 out of 24 students, but the depth of the analysis underwent a significant structural shift. Students abandoned the framework that localized the onus of wellness onto individual educators, recognizing burnout as an inevitable outcome of an unhealthy systemic environment rather than a personal failure. Camden highlighted this conceptual shift:

“The fact that teacher burnout became a theme in our classroom discussions is very notable because that means to me that teacher burnout is not single dimensional and instead is complexly related to all or most of the other issues we discussed in class. Essentially, to fix teacher burnout, placing all the responsibility on teachers to practice self-care and create boundaries is not a solution. We must instead work to create a more healthy environment for teachers to operate inside of”.

Karson explicitly synthesized our Week 2 resources to connect labor turnover directly to institutional neglect, noting that chronic underfunding forces educators to “find resources themselves for basic supplies ... leading to extreme exhaustion and conflicts with administrators”.

Crucially, by applying a critical intersectional multiculturalism framework, students developed a sophisticated intersectional lens on the labor crisis, recognizing the unique, compounding institutional taxation placed specifically on Black educators. Rather than viewing burnout as a color-evasive phenomenon, students utilized Dr. Mariah Harmon’s empirical scholarship [54] and core multimedia materials to analyze the hidden administrative and behavioral expectations downloaded onto teachers of color. Lexi detailed this hidden institutional tax, noting that Black teachers are frequently hired with an uncompensated, “additional disciplinary role for Black students, and serving as a bridge between the Black community and the school”. Stacey built upon this intersectional analysis by connecting Dr. Harmon’s text on Black sisterhood to macro-level demographic disparities and historical institutional trauma, noting that the extreme labor sorting and systemic oppression historically faced by students of color directly deters them from entering the teaching pipeline.

A central affordance of integrating *Abbott Elementary* as a public pedagogy text was its ability to visually and affectively fuse these separate policy issues, funding structures and labor exhaustion, into an integrated systemic analysis. By observing the narrative arc of the series (specifically Season 1, Episode 2 “Light Bulb”), students stopped viewing teacher burnout as an individual psychological failure, instead identifying it as a direct physical symptom of severe resource deprivation, witnessing the direct line between a macro-level budget deficit and a teacher’s personal bodily collapse. Tiffany leveraged this specific public pedagogy text to construct an elegant critique of how structural

disinvestment forces educators to vicariously assume municipal roles, leading to immediate systemic drop-out:

“In the second episode of *Abbott Elementary*, Janine demonstrated the effects of teacher burnout because she spent a lot of her energy attempting to fix the broken light in the hallway when no one else was going to. This led her to not eating throughout the day and eventually fainting. I feel that this episode was able to demonstrate how many teachers end up taking extra jobs around the school when there are problems. However, this can be harmful for teachers because they can get exhausted doing these large amounts of work. I think that it was important that *Abbott Elementary* touched on this because this is a part of teaching that isn’t really talked about ... we do not want teachers leaving the field due to overworking”.

Collectively, these findings illustrate the utility of integrating *Abbott Elementary* as a form of public pedagogy within an undergraduate interdisciplinary Honors seminar. The data suggest that when popular culture is treated not as a passive entertainment tool, but as a primary site of scholarly inquiry, it affords opportunities for students to bridge the gap between “pop culture” and complex policy analysis. Most significantly, this approach supported students in moving beyond the individualized, deficit-based perspectives commonly associated with the “urban schools” genre, demonstrating a pivot away from community-level blaming toward an interrogation of the systemic and institutional structures that shape educational outcomes.

6. Discussion

The primary objective of this exploratory study was to explore how integrating popular culture, specifically the television sitcom *Abbott Elementary*, as a text for critical inquiry in an interdisciplinary higher education setting can challenge deficit-based student perspectives and encourage systemic policy analysis. The empirical evidence gathered from this seminar suggests that this pedagogical model provides an effective avenue for achieving these goals. Over the course of the eight-week seminar, participants’ reflections indicated a meaningful evolution from initial views that mirrored hegemonic media tropes of urban schools as sites of inherent violence, apathy, and individualized failure toward a more structurally literate perspective. Rather than pathologizing urban school stakeholders or viewing structural limitations through the romanticized lens of the “teacher-as-savior”, many students demonstrated an increased capacity to ground complex educational realities within macro-level institutional configurations. By evaluating the hidden mechanics of market-driven school choice, gifted tracking, and municipal school debt cycles, these undergraduate participants demonstrated that contemporary popular culture can serve as a substantive curricular anchor. When operationalized through a critical intersectional multiculturalism framework, public pedagogy can effectively support students in shifting their focus away from community-level blaming and toward structural equity and institutional critique.

6.1. *Abbott Elementary* as a Catalyst for Public Pedagogy

The findings of this study align with Giroux’s [3,7] conceptualization of public pedagogy, illustrating that popular culture texts function as meaningful forces that help construct, reinforce, or challenge public consciousness. At the onset of the seminar, students’ Initial Reflections supported Giroux’s assertion that learning occurs continuously outside formal schooling boundaries. Participants entered the classroom already influenced by commercial media representations, local anxieties, and sensationalized news cycles [2]. By establishing *Abbott Elementary* as a core curricular text, the seminar functioned as what

Giroux terms a “space of translation” [7] (p. 691), providing a structural bridge where students’ private, unexamined assumptions, such as Clark’s immediate associations of urban schools with “chaos” or Naomi’s media-induced professional anxieties, could be placed in direct dialogue with macro-level public policies.

This conceptual translation was facilitated by the text’s mockumentary format and comedic genre, which helped bridge intellectual and affective modes of learning by connecting pleasure to meaning [7]. While traditional higher education structures often treat serious academic analysis and entertainment as antithetical practices [14], our findings indicate that the satirical, hybrid nature of the mockumentary format [41] can serve as a productive pedagogical tool. The humor of the series appeared to help students engage with challenging, emotionally taxing topics like institutional disinvestment and labor exploitation without shifting immediately into defensive resistance or fatalistic avoidance. As Texas noted, the comedic framing allowed for “normalizing the idea of urban schools while also pointing out the many systematic issues occurring within them”. Rather than alienating the viewers, the show’s descriptive satire encouraged students to examine structural failures through a critical lens [41], converting what might otherwise be passive entertainment into an opportunity for systemic critique that simultaneously respects the humanity of the community [35].

These outcomes stand in contrast to the historical canon of dour, combative, or overly sentimental educational media frequently reviewed in higher education literature [34]. Hollywood’s traditional “urban schools” genre, exemplified by legacy films like *Lean on Me* (1989) or *Dangerous Minds* (1995), often presents under-resourced school environments as grim, pathologized spaces requiring a solitary hero to rescue inherently deficient students [34,35]. Our Initial Reflection data indicated that these historical representations continue to influence public opinion, casting a long shadow over how modern undergraduates perceive urban school settings.

By contrast, *Abbott Elementary* operates as a distinct counternarrative. Instead of flattening the educational landscape into a tragedy of community deficit, the public pedagogy of the show centers relationality, structural advocacy, and situational joy [36,47]. This re-centering was reflected in students’ analytical shifts; participants like Kasey and Faye explicitly noted that moving beyond traditional “bleak” or “hopeless” media tropes encouraged them to recognize the “value, talent” and collaborative resilience present within urban school spaces, directly countering the deficit narratives that traditional films inadvertently reinforce [26].

Furthermore, the trajectory of the seminar encouraged a shift in how students categorized the media text itself, moving from a framework of simple consumption toward an acknowledgement of the show as a source of complex policy knowledge [14]. Initially, several participants viewed *Abbott Elementary* primarily through van Zoonen’s [1] lens of passive entertainment or as a source of “loose knowledge” (Marco). By introducing Kellner’s [6] critical intersectional multiculturalism approach, however, the seminar challenged the traditional text-based hierarchy of university coursework.

Placing a network sitcom alongside empirical policy briefs and sociological literature encouraged students to interrogate television as a complex pedagogical site layered with political, economic, and social codes [4]. Students showed signs of evolving from passive consumers into critical decoders [15], demonstrating that popular culture can effectively mediate high-level conversations around institutional structures when treated with deliberate instructional intentionality.

6.2. Disrupting Deficit Narratives Through the *Abbott Elementary* Counternarrative

The structural shifts observed in participants’ Final Reflections suggest that an intentional public pedagogy text can help unravel decades of deeply embedded cultural

socialization. To contextualize this development, the students' final understandings must be situated within the historical trajectory of the larger "urban schools" media genre. For over seventy years, stretching from *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) to twentieth-century cinematic staples like *Dangerous Minds* (1995) and *Freedom Writers* (2007), commercial media has frequently conditioned audiences to view urban education through an uncritical lens of pathology and systemic hopelessness.

Our Initial Reflection data supported the notion that these legacy media texts successfully act as default educational forces; undergraduates with no personal experience in urban environments initially adopted this pathologizing vocabulary, conceptualizing these spaces as "unsafe" environments populated by "unmotivated" youth. Comparing these initial orientations with the students' Final Reflections highlights how the critical introduction of *Abbott Elementary* helped subvert the twin pillars of the genre: the "white savior" archetype and the "culture of poverty" narrative [36].

In standard Hollywood iterations of urban education, systemic and structural institutional failures are routinely masked by individualized, temporary triumphs. Genre staples like *Freedom Writers* routinely position a lone, typically white outsider as a messianic figure who must step into a chaotic environment to "save" pathologized minoritized youth whom the existing infrastructure has failed. This framework exceptionalizes individual, sacrificial labor while rendering the surrounding community of veteran teachers and administrators as cynical or incompetent foils [34,45].

Abbott Elementary serves as an explicit structural counternarrative to this framework by centering a Black female lead (Janine Teagues) within a predominantly Black ensemble cast of multi-generational educators. The influence of this representation was visible in the students' critical reflections. Rather than unthinkingly absorbing the classic savior dynamics, students engaged in what Hall [15] categorizes as *oppositional* reading of traditional media.

Participants like Texas explicitly noted that the show actively "breaks the idea of the 'savior' teachers and even makes fun of the concept", illustrating that the characters aim to connect with their students rather than fundamentally "save" them. By replacing the hyper-individualized hero with a collaborative, multi-generational ensemble, the text supported students in dismantling the paternalistic dichotomy between the idealistic newcomer and the uncaring veteran [35]. Undergraduates observed that *Abbott Elementary's* teachers function as a realistic professional community, characterized by participants as "effective and caring teachers who value their students" (Faye) and who are "doing everything they possibly can" (Willa) collectively, rather than operating as isolated martyrs. Centering Black institutional professionals helped normalize the urban school environment, allowing students like Molly to appreciate a cast where Black educators and Black youth "are just getting to be kids" on an authentic, human level.

In tandem with reframing the savior trope, the intervention helped disrupt the "culture of poverty" narrative [36] that historically pathologizes urban families. Within the traditional media genre, families of minoritized students are routinely cast as hyper-apathetic barriers to academic success who devalue schooling [34,45]. Our Initial Reflection data confirmed that students initially carried these assumptions, writing that urban systems suffer from "less parent engagement" (Stacey) or that behavioral issues stem directly from volatile homes where "parents may be unavailable" (Graham D.).

By treating *Abbott Elementary* as an object of structured critique, students showed a capacity to deconstruct these, deficit-saturated assumptions. Experiencing how the show's characters approach families with an asset-based, localized insider status prompted students to reconfigure their interpretations of urban home lives. Undergraduates like KM explicitly acknowledged this internal development, noting an initial bias that

families “could be the source of problems” before realizing a structural need to be “more gracious towards urban families and what they can bring to the table”.

Concurrently, this analytical humanization allowed students to move past individualized, moralistic explanations for school failure and develop structural literacy. In their Initial Reflections, when students encountered challenges like low achievement or campus decay, they often localized the blame within the perceived character lapses of individuals, detached parents, or unmotivated school staff. Following the integration of *Abbott Elementary* as public pedagogy, student discourse shifted. Rather than blaming the surrounding community for a school’s material hardships, participants increasingly recognized that these contextual realities are the engineered outcomes of long-standing policy configurations. Underfunding, teacher shortages, and resource scarcity were less likely to be framed as natural outgrowths of a neighborhood’s culture, but as systemic challenges driven by macro-economic factors.

As Bartleby critically reflected, urban school hardships are directly connected to “systemic flaws that have existed for quite some time”. Students less frequently treated systemic symptoms in isolation; instead, they built more sophisticated institutional connections, recognizing how predatory municipal school debt architectures (Clark, Marco, Tiffany) or market-driven charter expansions (Texas, Willa, Stacey) actively impact local neighborhood resources. Ultimately, as KM summarized, the framework suggested that because “the history of education is founded on unequal footing ... it is impossible to blame just any one thing. The system itself needs to be reformed”. By leveraging *Abbott Elementary* as an interpretive anchor, the seminar helped to shift students from a landscape of localized community blame toward a more sophisticated critique of macro-level institutional power.

6.3. The Utility of Multiperspectival Analysis in Interdisciplinary Contexts

The analytical developments documented in this study demonstrate the pedagogical utility of operationalizing Kellner’s [6] critical intersectional multiculturalism framework through a structured triad of materials. By systematically pairing *Abbott Elementary* episodes with empirical research and multimedia texts featuring authentic community voices, the curriculum executed a three-pronged multiperspectival analysis, integrating political culture, textual analysis, and audience reception [6,10]. Rather than treating popular media as a superficial hook, this approach allowed students to unpack television as a complex public pedagogy embedded with social, political, and economic codes [4,7]. The intersectional lens [21] was explicitly reinforced by the selection of course materials, 68% of which centered the scholarship and lived experiences of Black women (13 out of 19 assigned materials). This deliberate curricular configuration provided students with the analytical tools needed to navigate the epistemic hegemonic forces inherent in mainstream media culture [6,17].

Significantly, our findings expand the existing literature by demonstrating that this critical policy literacy can be successfully cultivated outside traditional teacher preparation programs. As reviewed previously, when school-based media has historically been integrated into higher education coursework, it has generally been sequestered within undergraduate or graduate teacher education courses (e.g., [5,22,23,26]). These interventions traditionally rely on media to spark individual pedagogical reflection or re-orient pre-service teacher candidates’ career expectations [4,25]. This narrow application ignores the profound role public pedagogy plays in shaping broader public discourse and democratic decision-making.

By moving the intervention into an interdisciplinary seminar, this study responds to calls to use educational media to stimulate a wider public critique of how schooling is represented [16,33]. 33% of the seminar participants were non-education majors,

including students studying Criminal Justice, Geology, Computer Science, and Actuarial Science. The Final Reflections demonstrate that these non-education majors achieved a high level of structural policy literacy. For instance, Clark (Criminal Justice) integrated sociological tracking data to unpack biased sorting in gifted education. Similarly, Graham D. (Computer Science) historicized the racist underpinnings of “school choice” policies, while Marco (Actuarial Science) provided a macro-structural critique of Wall Street municipal debt cycles and predatory institutional lending. These outcomes suggest that educational policy literacy is not merely a specialized professional credential for future teachers, but a vital civic capacity for all citizens. In this way, the interdisciplinary classroom operationalizes Quinta Brunson’s assertion that supporting and reforming education is ultimately “as much a citizen’s job as it is a teacher’s job” [47].

This conceptual development is best understood by mapping student trajectories onto Hall’s [15] encoding/decoding framework. At the beginning of the course, students predominantly occupied a *dominant hegemonic* decoding position. They unthinkingly absorbed and reproduced the dominant ideologies and deficit stereotypes encoded within mainstream news media and commercial film [14,15]. This uncritical acceptance was evident in their initial characterizations of urban campuses as inherently violent, “unsafe” spaces (Clark, Lexi, Naomi) and their paternalistic, color-evasive assumptions that urban students simply lacked character motivation (Camden) or suffered from a universal lack of parent engagement (Stacey). In essence, their initial readings saw “the [media] as the [media] sees itself” [14], blindly absorbing pathologizing tropes about minoritized communities.

Through the intervention of the multiperspectival triad, students shifted from passive baseline consumption into critical, *negotiated* or *oppositional* decoding positions [6,15]. Armed with empirical counterweights, students recognized how traditional media had actively “skewed” their understandings (Texas). They began exercising deliberate semiotic agency, actively resisting dominant/deficit cultural manipulation and constructing alternative readings grounded in structural frames [6].

This movement into an oppositional stance manifested as students began to deconstruct and explicitly mock the traditional “white savior” archetype (Texas), framing it as an artificial commercial device that individualizes systemic issues. Furthermore, students achieved a negotiated or oppositional reading of macro-level educational funding. Rather than treating local financial scarcity as a natural, localized byproduct of neighborhood poverty, students like Clark, Lexi, and Tiffany developed an oppositional critique of the institutional structures themselves, interrogating the predatory, macro-economic debt cycles engineered around credit ratings and Wall Street interests. This shift indicates that when popular culture is treated as a primary text for critical deconstruction, it enables diverse undergraduates to look past hegemonic narratives, build robust structural literacy, and articulate systemic equity solutions.

7. Limitations and Future Directions

While the integration of *Abbott Elementary* as public pedagogy yielded meaningful shifts in students’ structural literacy, a critical assessment of the study’s parameters is necessary to contextualize these outcomes. Examining the structural boundaries of the course design and the participant sample clarifies the scope and generalizability of the findings. This section outlines the study’s limitations and offers actionable recommendations to guide future interdisciplinary teaching practices and subsequent educational research.

7.1. Limitations

The first limitation of this study stems from the constraints of course duration and analytical depth. Operating as an eight-week Advanced Honors Seminar, this curriculum

employed a condensed, “one shot” pedagogical approach. Because the course structure required introducing a new educational policy issue each week to provide a comprehensive overview, the pursuit of topical breadth may have sacrificed a deeper, more sustained exploration of individual, highly complex systemic issues.

Second, the findings were inherently shaped by curricular selection bias and task directionality. The instructor’s purposeful selection of specific *Abbott Elementary* episodes and paired readings directly influenced which policy issues students prioritized or deprioritized in their Final Reflections. For example, episodes focusing heavily on standardized testing or student behavior and discipline were not featured in this specific course design. Because these topics were absent from the curriculum, students lacked the scaffolded tools to critique them structurally, which likely explains why these issues, despite being present in Initial Reflections, faded from students’ Final Reflections. Furthermore, the assignment instructions (see Figure 1) explicitly cued participants to analyze how their thinking had evolved over time. This prompt-driven directionality functions as a demand characteristic that could artificially inflate or structurally cue a narrative of change within student essays. While the student-led self-assessment rubric was deployed as a safeguard against grading bias, the presence of this prompt parameter remains a structural limitation.

Finally, the scope of this inquiry is bounded by its localized context, small sample size, and the specific participant demographics. This study was conducted as a localized pedagogical inquiry with a single section of 24 self-selected Honors students. This small sample size requires that the emergent insights be interpreted within this narrow, bounded classroom environment rather than as sweeping evaluative metrics.

Furthermore, the participant pool skewed predominantly white, female, and consisted of 67% Education majors. In accordance with Hall’s [15] encoding/decoding framework, the social locations of these participants functioned as the primary interpretive frames through which they evaluated the public pedagogy. A student population with different racial, socioeconomic, or institutional demographics would bring distinct lived experiences and cultural frames to the classroom, which would likely yield different negotiated or oppositional readings of the same media text. While the seminar successfully integrated non-education majors, the highly sophisticated cross-disciplinary transfer demonstrated by specific embedded exemplars (such as Clark in Criminal Justice or Marco in Actuarial Science) should be viewed as illustrative of the pedagogy’s localized possibilities rather than representative of all interdisciplinary undergraduate populations. In accordance with a qualitative epistemological standpoint, the analytical goal of this exploratory design was “thick description” and inductive depth [50], not statistical generalizability, demographic standardization, or universal verification. Therefore, these findings are presented not to establish baseline generalizability, but to offer transferable insights that higher education practitioners can decode and adapt within their own unique institutional contexts.

7.2. Recommendations for Practice and Pedagogy

To effectively leverage popular culture in higher education, instructors across academic disciplines should treat popular media as a primary text for critical analysis rather than an ornamental conversation starter. Elevating commercial media to a core site of scholarly inquiry encourages students to apply rigorous theoretical frameworks to their everyday media consumption. Furthermore, faculty should adopt a strategic resource pairing model, intentionally structuring their curriculum around a triad of entertainment media, empirical research, and authentic stakeholder voices. This multiperspectival scaffolding [6,10] ensures that popular culture texts are properly historicized and contextualized by established academic scholarship, moving students past superficial engagement. Finally, course designs should incorporate communal viewing experiences within class

sessions to optimize the social academic environment. Shared viewing experiences foster deep affective engagement, creating a collaborative and supportive classroom space where students can collectively process complex, emotionally heavy systemic inequities.

7.3. Recommendations for Future Research

To expand upon the insights generated by this exploratory study, subsequent scholarship should prioritize several critical directions, beginning with longitudinal studies. Future tracking of participants as they navigate advanced coursework and enter their professional careers would determine whether the observed shifts from deficit-based thinking to systemic analysis persist over time or fade once students leave the bounded seminar environment. Researchers should also replicate this pedagogical model across diverse institutional contexts, such as Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) or within non-Honors settings. Investigating these varied spaces will provide essential insight into how different student populations, bringing distinct social locations, decode and negotiate the structural narratives of educational media. Lastly, future inquiries should expand contemporary media analysis by applying this same critical intersectional multiculturalism framework to other emerging public pedagogy formats, including viral social media trends, digital advocacy campaigns, and popular podcasts. This continuous expansion is vital to ensure higher education pedagogy keeps pace with the rapidly evolving information landscape shaping public consciousness.

8. Conclusions

This exploratory study highlights the broader significance of intentionally integrating popular culture into the university curriculum to foster critical policy literacy across diverse undergraduate populations. In an increasingly complex and rapidly evolving information landscape, the boundaries between entertainment and public discourse continue to blur. Higher education cannot afford to dismiss commercial media as mere leisure; instead, institutions must actively equip students with the analytical skills necessary to decode, interrogate, and deconstruct the pervasive narratives that quietly shape their public consciousness.

As illustrated by this interdisciplinary seminar, when a contemporary text like *Abbott Elementary* is paired with empirical research and authentic stakeholder voices, it can provide an accessible, humanizing framework that helps students look past hegemonic deficit tropes. This pedagogical approach can support undergraduates in moving away from a framework of localized, individual blame and toward a sophisticated, structural understanding of macro-level institutional configurations.

Ultimately, this work serves as a call to action for higher education instructors across all academic disciplines to embrace popular culture not as a superficial classroom novelty but as a vital, transformative tool. By treating public pedagogy as a primary site of rigorous scholarly inquiry, faculty can empower the next generation of citizens to critically analyze systemic inequities and actively advocate for meaningful equity and systemic change.

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