

The Teacher Apprenticeship Model: A Dialectical Analysis of a Crisis Response

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Abstract

This critical essay examines the neoliberal roots of the American teacher apprenticeship program as modeled by the state of Tennessee. A dialectical analysis of model program documents and a review of the economic history of apprenticeships, show that the current iteration of teacher apprenticeships is directly related to the crisis neoliberal capitalism faces today with pervasive teaching shortages in the post-COVID era. The underlying neoliberal roots of the apprenticeship model provides a note of caution to education program providers and their faculty who are looking to engage in providing an apprenticeship model.

Keywords

Apprenticeship, Teacher Shortage, Alternative Licensing, Teacher Preparation, Educational Program Providers

1. Introduction

May 11th, 2023 marked the ending of the public health emergency declaration by the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023*). A post-pandemic impact on education in the United States has been to worsen the teaching shortage. Historically, teacher shortages in the United States have a multitude of factors at play. Issues related to salary, academic area of study, teacher preparation program enrollment, and K-12 student enrollment are commonly cited influences. With these are commonly acknowledged factors, researchers have recognized the prominent of teacher attrition as a problem and have advocated for greater retention efforts to address school culture, pay, and support (*Sutcher et al., 2019*). In combating the teacher shortage that has been accelerated by the pandemic, the emphasis on teacher apprenticeship models is garnering greater attention and is being im-

plemented across various states. Tennessee is seen as a formative leader in teacher apprenticeships in post-pandemic America and their model will be utilized in this paper.

Apprenticeships in general, have been described as a “long proven method” of training workers, and Tennessee’s teacher apprenticeship program is primarily touted for its connection to neoliberal economic values. “Apprenticeship programs are high-quality, industry-driven, work-based learning pathways...” (Tennessee Department of Education, 2022a: para. 7 & 9). At the same time, the economic focused messaging on apprenticeships does not account for how apprenticeships internationally have faced challenges as employers have ended using them due to fears of rising costs (Grollman & Rauner, 2007). Apprenticeships may face support up front to meet a short-term need, but if long term objectives are not prioritized by employers, apprenticeships will have a short lifespan. This is due to the long-term costs associated with retaining higher wage-earning workers deterring employers from continuing to use the apprenticeship pathway (Smits, 2006: p. 342). A similar challenge may present itself as teacher apprentices become fully certified and begin to qualify for higher pay as a result of reaching training requirements and in gaining experience.

The teacher apprenticeship initiative seeks to address a shortage of almost a million teachers and working to provide further support through the hiring of support personnel, teacher aids, Pre-K early childhood teachers, and child development specialists (Apprenticeship USA, 2023). Related terms with the program are apprentice which denotes the teaching candidate, outcome-based learning, which emphasizes the mastery of skills and program progression that is individualized. Registered apprenticeship program which is the formally recognized partnership by the U.S. Department of labor or state agency and is an “industry vetted and approved” (Apprenticeship USA, 2022). Involvement of higher education is not mentioned within the definition examined. To support schools during the pandemic, the federal government undertook efforts to encourage retired teachers to return to the classroom, provide incentive pay through the America Rescue Plan to help with teacher retention, while working with the U.S. Department of Labor to establish an apprenticeship program to address teacher recruitment (Stanford, 2022).

The purpose of this critical essay is to analyze the creation of the teacher apprenticeship program as it has been created amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. In assessing how and why the teacher apprenticeship model came to be, teacher preparation programs and professionals will have a developed contextual understanding of the program and the spoken and unspoken purposes that have led to the rise of this program model.

2. Literature Review

Apprenticeships owe their existence to the feudal economic system which arose in Europe. Marx identified that each economic system possesses unique positions, roles, and responsibilities that come about due to the economic structure

that is dominant at a point in time. “In ancient Rome we have patricians, knights, plebeians, slaves: in the Middle Ages, feudal lords, vassals, guild-master’s, journeymen, apprentices, serfs: in almost all of these classes, again, subordinate gradations” (Marx & Engels, 1888/1985: p. 80). Apprenticeships were regulated through guilds and civil law and while direct ties may have led to opportunities for some, indirect relations between families and master trades persons were common. The apprenticeship structure regulated length of service, housing, and related provisions, as well as progression to learning a new skill (Leunig et al., 2011). Continued economic changes shaped the structure of apprenticeships, which points to a system that was varied in nature, and not one that was singular in every respect throughout time. Snell (1996) distinguished between “guild apprenticeships,” “statutory apprenticeships,” and “voluntary apprenticeships (p. 303) in England. These “blends” of apprenticeships occurred due to increasing economic changes that shifted the nature of apprenticeships and challenged the nature of apprenticeships. The change from guild to statutory apprenticeship show the changing economic structure impacted apprenticeships at the end of the guild apprenticeships and the dawn of the statutory apprenticeships.

The explanations put forward for these changes have included consideration of the buoyancy of the home market, as associated with fluctuations in agricultural prices; the desire of masters to increase output by taking greater numbers of apprentices, by-passing traditional quotas and stipulations; the difficulty of subsequently applying the 1563 Act to trades not in existence at that date; the reconsidered attitudes to regulation among justices and those swayed by Adam Smith; the downward pressure on artisan real wages, and the effects of this and journeyman unemployment on apprentice expectations; alteration in the work and payment of journeymen-greater emphasis on piece rates- and the influence that has had on incentives to train... In addition, the transfigured technological and skill requirements of many trades also dictated readjustments in skilled training, while the intensification of capital investment and enlargement of the scale of production in many essential industries, away from family-economy units, had direct repercussions for apprenticeship (Snell, 1996: p. 314).

With the rise of industrialism and the creation of the United States, apprenticeships would continue to exist as an economic influence, but one that was not as central to the role of the economy, and one that was changed further due to economic exigencies.

3. Apprenticeships in America

Once a staple of the feudal system, apprenticeships played a lessened role in the training of workers in America. An example of this lessened role is seen in the context of the apprenticeship of clerks between the Revolutionary and Civil War eras. The apprenticeship of store clerks would foster a series of close connections between clerks and their sponsors, culminating in clerks becoming shopkeepers. Continued changes in the industrial economy led to the demise of the appren-

ticeship system in clerking, resulting in workers remaining at the level of storekeeper while the corporate structure of governance and relations solidified (Luskey, 2004). Constrained as an avenue to the workplace, the diminutive influence of apprenticeships in the American economy continues to the present day. This can be seen most recently in employment data as in 2017, 0.2% of American workers were in an apprenticeship (Herk, 2017: para. 7).

4. Conceptual Framework

In examining teacher apprenticeships, a framework is needed that evaluates in its entirety how the post-pandemic teacher apprenticeship model was created. As a faculty member in an educational preparation program, I noticed the prominent phrasing of the benefits of the apprenticeship program along economic lines. I noticed as well that the program was created from the effects and lingering aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. A lens of analysis would have to take into account the nature of change over time and how it influences new understandings from a time of crisis. As a result of these realizations, the lens of examination for this critical essay is dialectical materialism as informed by Bukharin (1925/2022).

Dialectical materialism helps determine the “material” basis of an idea that arose from a determined need. Bukharin’s ideas of mental culture, form, and elements provide a congruent fit for synthesizing teacher apprenticeships. In this lens, economic life is in a constant state of motion, which is distinguished by the historical and economic particularities at any given point in time. The economic organization of society is a unique “form” that is an outgrowth of the economic structure, and not resulting in and of itself (p. 81). Each economic epoch contains a “mental culture” (p. 69) that is also informed by predominant economic attitudes which shape dominant narratives through a culture. For Bukharin, “contradiction” is the law of change which creates the continual state of motion in a historical period as continual challenges and realities force society to adapt (p. 84-85) while “elements” constitute the interaction of technology and workers in the workplace. **Figure 1** details Bukharin’s concepts that inform this critique that is used for this paper.

5. The form of History that Informs the Teacher Apprenticeship Model

Bukharin distinguishes identifiable times in history as being “forms” with established economic differences. “Human society therefore passes through different stages, different forms, in its evolution or decline. It follows, in the first place, that we must consider and investigate each form of society in its own peculiar terms” (Bukharin, 1925/2022: p. 73). The form that teacher apprenticeships have arisen is in the post-cold war world, with free-market economic order as defined through neoliberalism. As a paradigm, neoliberalism has roots in the 1980s and 1990s with the end of Reagan conservatism and the acceleration of global trade

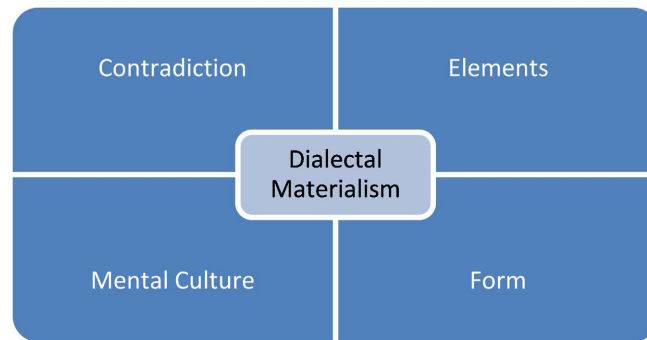


Figure 1. A dialectical synthesis framework.

(Phillips-Fein, 2019: p. 349). At this point in time, neoliberalism has been established for roughly 30 - 40 years.

We may very well be at the end point of a form that dominates our time. Some eras may be brought in quickly by an event, other changes in epochs take extended time and lack a clear starting or ending point. Neoliberalism may be an example of extended decline and ending and researchers have noticed this since the start of the 21st century. “The mere fact that the two main powerhouses of the global economy—the US and China—are deficit financing upto the hilt is, surely, a compelling sign that neoliberalism is in trouble if not actually dead as a viable theoretical guide...” (Harvey, 2007: p. 188). While it may or may not be the end of neoliberalism as we know it, the form of our time is facing challenges. Just as an economic age has an economic form, it follows according to Bukharin, that a mental lens or culture of understanding would be present in society as well.

6. The Mental Culture that Informs the Teacher Apprenticeship Model

With the emergence of neoliberalism as a dominant economic thought at the dawn of the 21st century, the nature of the role of apprenticeships has changed. Neoliberalism as a mental culture, espouses free-market economic concepts and not only is it a powerful economic factor, but it is also a mindset that influences social, political, and personal viewpoints that are pervasive throughout the culture (Davies, 2014). As the global economic system oversaw a global stagnation of wages, apprenticeships came to be seen as the ideal neoliberal solution. Workers in apprenticeships would gain skills, or “currency” (Bewick, 2015: p. 8) which serves to transition worker frustration to a solution crafted through a neoliberal lens.

Bruna & Ben LaHouel (2020) contend that higher education institutions in a crisis driven apprenticeship system, become more “efficient” in aligning training to market needs as apprenticeships meet the means of continual production and to ameliorate economic distortions in a neoliberal quest to become “accelerators of employability” and “vectors for equal opportunities” (pp. 34 & 46). The teach-

ing profession is noted for having a significant mismatch between a largely white population of teachers and the growing numbers of students of color they teach (Gregory, 2023). To respond to this contradiction, the continuing dialectic of discussion has created a narrative of how teacher apprenticeships can be a possible solution to this problem (Garcia, 2020). Unknown to many instructors and administrators in education preparation programs, is the fact that the teacher apprenticeship model has a long history in the United States. According to Gelber (2022), previous iterations of the apprenticeship model took the form of “grow your own” programs and Future teachers of America (FTA) which were designed to increase the number of rural teachers and teachers of color. The post 1945 economy featured low pay for teachers and the proposed solutions failed to meet their goals (Gelber, 2022: p. 38).

7. The Pandemic as a Driving Economic Contradiction

Briggs et al. (2020) explained how capitalism was staggered on an international level in 2008 leading to criticism of the neoliberal order but that the pandemic changed the world forever. To them, the pandemic represented a critical stage that has brought the neoliberal economic order to a standstill. The neoliberal economic system is still dominant, but it exists as a hollow shell of its former self. “dead, but dominant” (Briggs et al., 2020, in citing Peck, 2010, p. 832). The ensuing contradiction of conditions has created an environment where new solutions are sought after to justify the continuing economic order. The movement of people and goods favored in Neoliberalism, became a detriment, and long needed supplies were in shortage due to the neoliberal values of efficiency and comparative advantage, which came to be of limited value during the pandemic (Saad-Filho, 2020). In cutting resources to publicly funded health institutions, neoliberalism undermined the importance of stocking essential equipment and barriers needed, to get through the pandemic (Budzi, 2022).

8. Elements as They Relate to the Teacher Apprenticeship Model

Bukharin (1925/2022) incorporates “elements” in historical materialism as consisting of the relationship between technology and workers. “Wherever a society exists, there must be a certain equilibrium between its technology and its economy” (p. 165). There is a corresponding secondary impact on the element of technology in relation to teacher apprenticeships. Teacher preparation programs are encouraged to be “flexible” in working with districts and to modify the length of courses in order to better meet the needs of districts and students” (Tennessee Department of Education, 2022b). Conversely, the role of the district is to support the teacher apprentice in their teacher training. Specific mentoring practices are provided, but a focus on pedagogy itself, is not provided. Instead, the apprentice is to learn the skill of teaching as practiced by the individual district. “Teachers learn the district’s culture, priorities, and best practices from

mentor teachers from mentor teachers, training in the content and specialty areas most needed by students” (Tennessee Department of Education, 2022d).

From this concept of teacher training, students learn in alternative settings from night classes to online, increasing the reliance on online modalities to replace brick and mortar preparation.

9. Synthesis of Analysis

The rise of teacher apprenticeships in America coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, a contradiction event that mirrors historical patterns of challenges that face society on a continuing basis. Teacher apprenticeships are informed by neoliberal thought and economic priorities. This mental culture continues to permeate society and lessens the role of teacher preparation programs, at the expense of districts and beyond them, to the needs of the economy. “Employers are the foundation of every apprenticeship program...” (Tennessee Department of Education, 2022c: p. 9). As an element of society, technology continues to play a role in how workers engage labor in our economy. Teacher apprenticeships shift teacher training outside of the traditional classroom to online modalities, leading to the marginalization of teacher preparation programs and their voice as “partners.” Language such as “evidenced based practices” and promises of in-depth mentoring provide a positivist orientation to teacher preparation where only certain concepts are valued and others are forgotten. Teaching as a complex craft and the incorporation of social emotional learning and the needs of students, becomes a de-skilled practice of “best evidence” teaching procedures.

10. Conclusion

Teacher preparation programs would benefit from examining what is truly in the best interests of students before aligning themselves with teacher apprenticeship programs. The admitted basis of these programs is the employer. Teacher preparation and gaining of skills is not the foremost concern or priority in these programs. There is value in learning from classroom practice. However, the value of teacher mentoring may be overstated as mentors are already pressed for time as they are teaching in short-staffed schools and are engaged in teaching and school activities themselves. These factors are a serious limit to the idea that there will be authentic, learning experiences for teacher apprentices with their mentors. The rush to teacher apprenticeship with phraseology of “high quality” and “evidence based” does not take into consideration the social emotional learning needs of students and self-care needs of teachers. A continued positivist orientation to teacher training will have limited success as the need of students is greater than just falling behind content knowledge. Teacher apprenticeships are a hastened response to a problem that requires long term prioritizing of learning and valuing of pedagogy, amidst an economic worldview that is at an end.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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