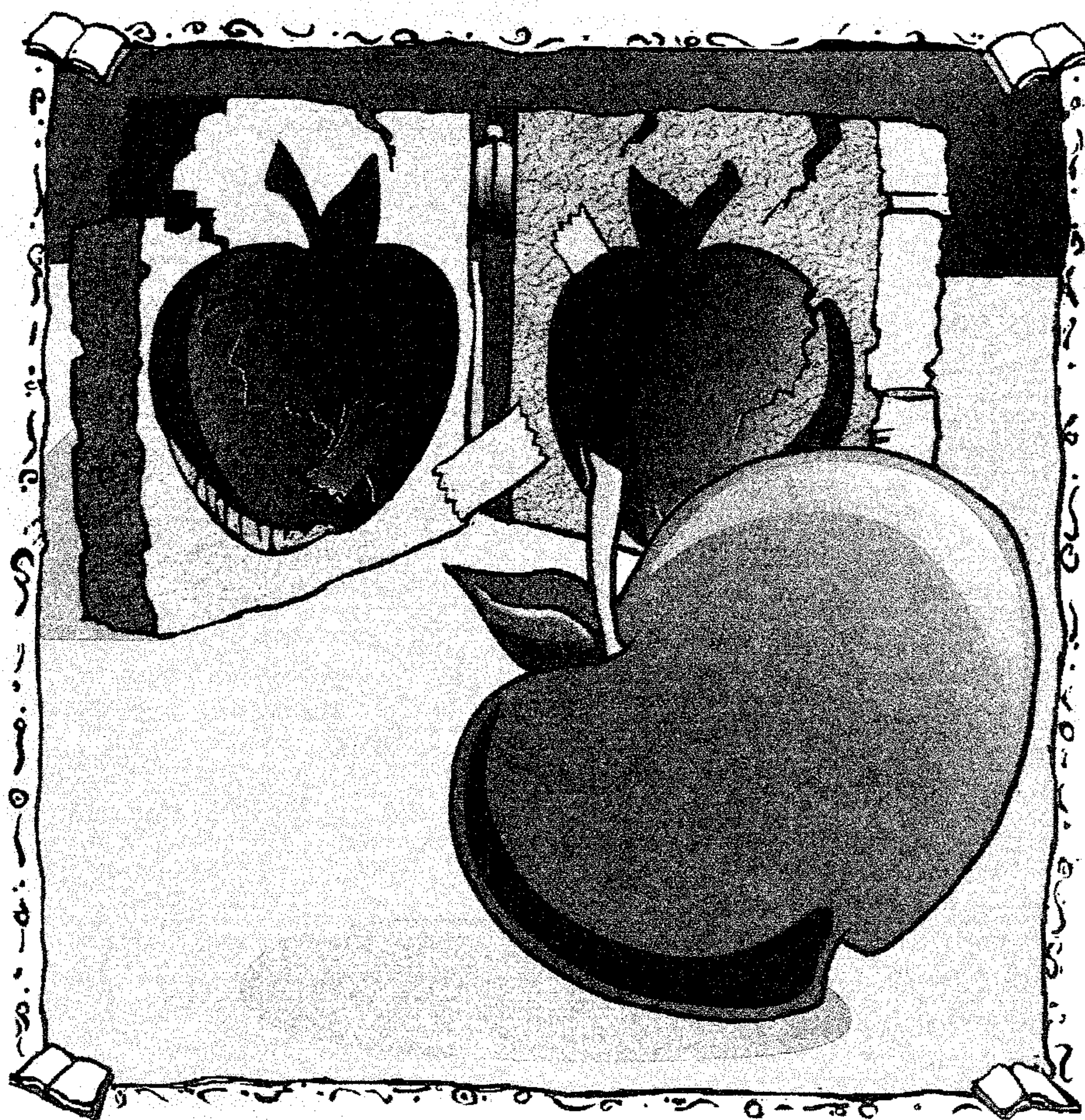

An Unlovely Legacy

The Disabling Impact of the Market On American Teacher Education

Mr. Labaree explores the nature of market-oriented objectives and discusses the kinds of problems that they have created for the form and content of teacher education. He also takes a close look at one current reform initiative, the teacher professionalization movement, which represents an effort to buffer teacher education from the influence of the market.

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BY DAVID F. LABAREE



AMERICAN teacher education is back in the news, but unfortunately the news is not good. This, however, is far from being a novel situation. From my reading of the history of American education, it seems that it has always been open season on teacher education. Now, as in the past, everyone seems to have something bad to say about the way we prepare our teachers. If you believe what you read and what you hear, a lot of what is wrong with American education these days can be traced to the failings of teachers and to shortcomings in the processes by which we train them for their tasks. We are told that students are not learning, that productivity is not growing, that economic competitiveness is declining — all to some extent because teachers don't know how to teach.

As a result, politicians and policy makers at all levels have been talking about a number of possible remedies: testing students as they enter and leave teacher education programs, extending and upgrading the content of these programs, and even bypassing the programs altogether through alternative certification. The latter option means pushing people with subject-matter expertise or practical occupational experience directly into the classroom, thus protecting them from the corrupting influence of schools of education. Meanwhile, academics in the more prestigious colleges within American universities ridicule the curriculum of the school of education for what they

DAVID F. LABAREE is an associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Michigan State University, East Lansing.

consider its mindlessness and uselessness. Ordinary citizens also get into the act. For example, there is a recent book written by a journalist, Rita Kramer, who spent some time sitting in teacher education classrooms and interviewing education professors. Her title quite nicely captures the general lack of restraint with which critics have tended to approach teacher education: *Ed School Follies: The Miseducation of America's Teachers*.¹

As I said, none of this criticism of teacher education is particularly new. The training of teachers has never been revered by the academy or terribly popular with the public. If one could sum up the usual complaints about teacher education in one sentence, it would be something like this: "Schools of education have failed to provide an education for teachers that is either academically elevated or pedagogically effective." Instead of rallying to the defense of the teacher education establishment, of which I am a part, I would like to explore why this enterprise has earned such a bad reputation.

Yes, teacher education in the U.S. has been and in many ways continues to be an intellectually undemanding and frequently ineffectual form of professional training. Where I disagree with the current pattern of criticism, however, is in the diagnosis of the roots of the problem. The most popular current diagnosis of what ails American teacher education follows directly from the reigning view of what the problem is with schooling in general. In the conservative climate of the past decade, that understanding is simple to state. The problem with schools, we are told, is that they have been ruined by too much politics; the solution, we hear, is to inject a little discipline from the marketplace. This interpretation has become part of the fabric of contemporary thought about schools, but the most prominent ideological weavers currently working in this tradition are John Chubb and Terry Moe, authors of *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*.²

My own interpretation is precisely the opposite of theirs. I argue that both K-12 education and teacher education have been ruined by too much market influence and not enough democratic politics. A generous democratic rhetoric has surrounded teacher education from the days of the first normal schools, but the fact of the matter is that the dominant influ-

ence on the form and content of teacher education has come not from politics but from the market.

This market influence has resulted in the widespread belief that education has two purposes: one I call "social efficiency"; the other, "social mobility." These two objectives have had some contradictory effects on teacher education. But they have a great deal in common, since both represent ways that teacher education has been required to respond to demands from the market — the job market in the case of social efficiency and the credentials market in the case of social mobility. The net result has been to undermine efforts to enrich the quality, duration, rigor, and political aims of teacher education. The history of teacher education has not been very elevated, either academically or politically — thanks directly, I suggest, to market influence.

In pursuing this theme, I will explore the following issues. First, I will say a little about the nature of these market-oriented purposes and their impact on American education in general. Then I will examine the historical role that each has played in shaping teacher education. This in turn will lead to a discussion of the kinds of problems that these objectives have brought about for the form and content of teacher education. And finally, I will explore one current reform initiative, known as the teacher profession-

alization movement, which represents an effort to buffer teacher education from the influence of the market. Will this effort move teacher education in a desirable direction or just replace one undesirable influence with another?

ALTERNATIVE PURPOSES IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

Both social efficiency and social mobility are purposes that have shaped American schooling in significant ways over the last 150 years. Let me say a little about the nature of each purpose and the character of its impact on schools.³

From the perspective of social efficiency, the purpose of schooling is to train students as future workers. This means providing them with the particular skills and attitudes required to fill the full range of positions in a stratified occupational structure. In short, according to this view, schools should give the job market what it wants. Social efficiency is an expression of the educational visions of employers, government officials, and taxpayers. These constituencies share a concern about filling job slots with skilled workers so that society will function efficiently, and they want schools to provide this service in a cost-effective manner.

From the perspective of social mobility, the purpose of schooling is to provide



individuals with an equal opportunity to attain the more desirable social positions. This goal expresses the educational visions of the parent of a school-age child. Such a parent is concerned less with meeting society's needs and keeping down costs than with using schools to help his or her child to get ahead. From this angle, the essence of schooling is to provide not vocational skills but educational credentials, which can be used as currency in the zero-sum competition for social status.

Note that both social efficiency and social mobility are purposes that link education directly to the job market. The key difference is that a person promoting the first goal views this link from the top down, taking the perspective of the educational provider, while a person promoting the second goal views the link from the bottom up, taking the perspective of the educational consumer.

In addition to these two market goals, however, there is also a third type of goal — arising from democratic politics — that has offered a more generous vision for American education. This is the goal that primarily motivated the founders of the common schools. The leaders of the common school movement saw universal public education as a mechanism for protecting the democratic polity from the growing class divisions and possessive individualism of an emerging market society. The common schools, they felt, could help establish a republican community on the basis of a shared educational experience cutting across class and ethnic differences. These schools could also help prepare people to function independently as citizens in a democratic society. This vision is at heart an inclusive one, grounded in political rather than economic concerns.

In spite of the power of the market, this democratic goal has found expression in American education in a number of ways over the years. There was the common school itself — which drew students from the whole community, presented them with a common curriculum, and generally chose to ignore the problem of articulating schooling with the structure of the job market. Then at the turn of the century came the comprehensive high school, which brought a heterogeneous array of students and programs together under one roof, even though students ex-

perienced quite different forms of education under that roof. More recently we have seen expressions of this goal in efforts at inclusive education, as reformers have sought to reduce inequalities associated with the race, class, gender, and handicapping conditions of students.

These three goals have frequently collided in the history of American education, resulting in an institution driven by contradictory impulses coexisting in a state of uneasy balance. However, the history of American teacher education has demonstrated a narrower range of purposes than this. There has been very little sign within teacher education of the effects of the democratic purposes that helped to shape schooling more generally — except, perhaps, a thin strand of democratic rhetoric running through the teacher education literature. In practice, teacher education has shown primarily the politically and socially narrowing effects of the market. Let's consider what effect each of these market purposes has had on American teacher education over the years.⁴

SOCIAL EFFICIENCY

While social efficiency goals for the teaching of students arose around 1900 (with the emergence of the high school and the advent of vocationalism), this emphasis came much earlier for the teaching of teachers. From the perspective of social efficiency, the central problem for teacher education was the chronic under-supply of teachers that developed in the mid-19th century and continued on into the early 20th century. The initial source of this problem was the development of universal public education, which produced a powerful demand for a large number of certified elementary teachers. In answer to this demand, the larger urban school systems opened their own normal schools, parallel to or incorporated within city high schools, for the purpose of staffing their elementary classrooms. At the same time, state governments around the country created state normal schools to meet the needs of those districts that could not support normal schools of their own.

Then, after elementary education had filled up, there came the rapid expansion of high school enrollments at the turn of the century. (High school attendance dou-

bled every decade from 1890 to 1940.) This in turn created a strong demand for high school teachers, and the answer to that demand was found in the creation of state teachers' colleges.

The essence of the social efficiency impulse was to create a form of teacher education that was organized around three basic principles — quantity, quality, and efficiency. The issue of quantity was the most obvious. The large number of slots to be filled created a need for a form of teacher education that could effectively mass-produce teachers. The issue of quality was a bit more complicated. The problem here was the need for a publicly credible system for certifying that the new teachers met some minimum standard of quality — a form of assurance that was necessary in order to maintain public support for the investment in schooling. This meant that teacher education needed to be established under public administration and around state certification requirements. The concern for quality, however, was undermined substantially by the concerns for quantity and efficiency.

By efficiency I mean simply that teacher education was under great pressure to prepare teachers at both low cost and high speed. The fiscal burden of expanding enrollments at the elementary level was enormous, and it only increased with the expansion of the high school. One answer to the efficiency problem was to feminize teaching, which school systems did in great haste starting in the mid-19th century. By paying women one-half of what they paid men, school systems found an effective way of getting two teachers for the price of one. The side effect, however, was to create a profession characterized by very high turnover, since, as a general rule, women tended to teach only during the half dozen or so years between the completion of their own education and marriage. As a result, teacher education found itself forced to turn out teachers even faster and more cheaply in order to compensate for the brief duration of teachers' service.

The consequence of the goal of social efficiency was that it put emphasis on the creation of a form of teacher education that could produce the most teachers, in the shortest time, at the lowest cost, and at the minimum level of ability that the public would allow. All in all, this hard-

ly constituted an elevating influence.

SOCIAL MOBILITY

Much to the chagrin of the founders and funders of the various teacher education enterprises, these institutions quickly became subverted by another powerful market force: the demand by individuals for access to high school and college degrees and, through them, to social mobility. Teacher education was designed to be accessible and easy in the name of social efficiency. But ironically, it found itself the most accessible and easiest route to middle-class status for a large number of ambitious students and their parents. Jurgen Herbst has described this problem quite nicely in his book on the history of teacher education.⁵ There quickly emerged a strong form of consumer pressure on teacher education institutions to provide general liberal arts education for students who, in fact, had little or no intention of teaching.

The result was that normal schools underwent a gradual transition into general-purpose high schools. A case in point is the history of Philadelphia's Girls High School. Created in 1848, this school went through a series of name changes over the rest of the century — from Girls High School to Girls Normal School to Girls High and Normal School and finally back to Girls High School again. The problem in Philadelphia as elsewhere was that the purpose of the institution, though initially to train elementary teachers, was in fact up for grabs. Policy makers and fiscal authorities wanted these schools to retain their social efficiency aims and train teachers, but the parents of the school-age girls wanted them to provide a broad secondary education for their daughters.

We discover the same sorts of tensions playing out in the history of state teachers' colleges after the turn of century. These institutions were under considerable pressure from students to transform themselves into liberal arts colleges. And, given the extreme sensitivity of American higher education to consumer pressures, they eventually did just that in the 1920s and 1930s. By the 1960s and 1970s they moved one more step in that direction by becoming general-purpose universities. What was once the Michigan State Normal School in Ypsilanti is now Eastern Michigan University.

Consider the implications for teacher education of this pressure to provide social mobility. The fact that many teacher education students did not want to become teachers put the emphasis on a form

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of teacher education that was unobtrusive in character and minimal in scope for the convenience of students seeking a general education. These students were focused more on credentials and status than on learning and content, which meant that teacher education was expected to make only the most modest of demands so as not to block a student's access to the desired degree.

Now let's examine some problems with teacher education that can be traced to this pressure from the job market and the credentials market.

MARKET-BASED PROBLEMS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Some of the problems that markets created for teacher education derived from the conflict between the goals of social efficiency and social mobility. One such difficulty was simple inefficiency. The consumer pressure for mobility through teacher education promoted considerable inefficiency, since it led to the expansion of a system of teacher education that was producing a large number of nonteaching graduates. In effect, this amounted to a collective subsidy of individual ambition. As a result of this situation, teacher education grew accustomed to functioning as a system of mass pro-

duction with a low net yield. It was under constant pressure to produce ever more graduates and to keep ever more rigid control of the unit costs of this production, simply because the ultimate number of teachers produced was so small relative to the number of students processed.

In addition, teacher education developed a serious identity crisis because of the confusion over which market it was supposed to serve. Trying to run a teacher education program is quite difficult when you can't agree on its purpose. Is the primary focus on general or vocational education? Should the program concentrate on liberal arts or on teaching methods? Is the aim to provide an individual benefit for the consumer of higher education or a collective benefit for citizens needing qualified teachers? This uncertainty about purpose has afflicted teacher education from the very beginning and has continued right up to the recent past.

Some of the problems that teacher education has experienced derive from market-based commonalities between the goals of social efficiency and social mobility. After all, both of these tendencies arose from the perceived need to adapt teacher education to market demand. In the case of social efficiency, this was expressed as a need for more bodies in the classroom; in the case of social mobility, it was expressed as a need for credentials to equip students to compete for social position. Neither of these, I suggest, was a terribly noble goal for an educational institution. Neither provided any political vision for teacher education — no vision of exactly what education and teacher education should be, what kind of teachers we needed, what kind of learning we wanted them to foster, or what political/moral/social outcomes we wanted to produce.

In addition, both approaches to teacher preparation tended to undercut the creation of a strong educational content in teacher education programs. Social efficiency undercut content in the rush by policy makers to mass-produce teachers of minimum competence. Social mobility undercut content in the rush by ambitious individuals to use teachers' colleges as a means of climbing the social ladder. There is nothing in either goal that would press teacher education to provide an intensive and extensive educational experi-

