ISSUES OLD AND NEW

MARKET CONSTRAINTS ON TEACHER EDUCATION

Practically everyone writing on the topic of teacher preparation nowadays acknowledges some degree of discontent with existing training programs on all sides. It has always been open season on teacher education; and today, as in the past, detractors are free with criticism. David F. Labaree of Michigan State University comments: “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.”

Recent indictments of teacher preparatory programs for their alleged deficiencies differ from one another considerably, in emphasis and tone if not always so much in substance. But prescriptions for reform vary even more widely. Clark Kerr’s wry observation about the university’s tendency to gallop off in opposite directions simultaneously seems to apply equally well to the rhetoric of contemporary teacher education reform. Some recommend disbanding professional teacher-training programs entirely, for example, trusting that any well-educated college graduate can learn to become an effective classroom teacher through a brief apprenticeship and practical on-the-job experience. Others would modify the several components of existing undergraduate
baccalaureate-level programs, adjusting this or that element, bolstering their entry or exit criteria, changing field experiences, revamping methods courses, or strengthening general education requirements, and so on, but otherwise leaving the structure of programs basically intact. Still others argue on behalf of so-called alternative certification routes whose evident purpose is to bypass traditional training programs entirely.

One expedient might amount to little more than enrollment in a short preparatory regimen offered within a public school district. Again, the idea of having an abbreviated course of study offered cooperatively by a public school in partnership with a college- or university-based department of education attracts support. The presumption in both cases, of course, is that teacher training needs to become shorter, less theoretical, and more practical. Protagonists of this stripe frankly avow their preference for the devolution of teacher education into something akin to practice-oriented apprenticeship. What seems to be wanted, in effect, is a species of craft training.

Consistent with a modern tendency to escalate credentialing, at the opposite end of the spectrum repose reformers who would greatly expand the scale of present-day teacher preparation so as to make it more nearly resemble legal or medical training. Where there is agreement among critics, it tends to be limited only to the judgment that today's schools of education, like their predecessors of yesteryear, fail to provide an education for teachers that is either academically solid or pedagogically effective.²

Labaree's own analysis is instructive. He argues that both the form and content of teacher education have always been shaped by market influences and most particularly by the dominant purposes public schools have been called upon to serve, those of social efficiency and social mobility. (The former expresses the top-down perspective of the educational provider; while the latter reflects the bottom-up perspective of the educational consumer.) In terms of social efficiency, the purpose of schooling is held to be one of training students as future workers within a stratified occupational structure. The school's task, runs the argument, is to produce skilled workers and to do so cost-effectively, such that job slots at various levels within the hierarchy are occupied by capable people. Society therefore functions more efficiently.

Social mobility as an educational goal, on the other hand, reflects parents' desires to utilize schooling as a means for their offspring to "get ahead," to acquire the necessary educational credentials for achieving—