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Inside the Capitalist Education System

Anatol Dniester

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Contents

I The Machine	5
Health Impacts	5
Inequality	8
Indoctrination	9
II The Industry	10
Exam Boards	10
Education Inc.	14
Textbook Publishing	15
III The Commercialisation of Education	16
Education as a Privilege	16
Who Benefits from the Cuts?	17
Student Loans	18
References	19

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During the past decades, the schooling sector has become an industry like any other. Education is no longer a service to the society but a multimillion dollar business where the students are the commodity. It is concentrated in the hands of a few organisations who's wealth is rarely admitted. In a system where schools are run for profit and to generate college degrees, where people's futures are being judged by their grades, money has taken the lead role. This is the capitalist education system that we are now part of. Talking of the unethical background of the education system is a taboo. This pamphlet explains how the education industry undermines student health, is used as a device to generate profit, contributes to creating an unequal society and who really benefits from education cuts.

I The Machine

Health Impacts

The current school system and secondary school examinations are based on rigorous memorisation of facts. Because competition for university enrolment and employment is hard, cram schools, that aim at teaching their students maximum information in minimum time have emerged around the world. Cram schools place excessive stress on students. In a system where people are measured by the grades they receive, stress from exams, homework, revision and uncertain future cause anxiety and may lead to stress-related psychological disorders, serious levels of depression and even attempted suicide. Surveys have shown that over half of questioned Year 11 students taking GCSE exams opt for stress-relieve activities.

Stress is the body's reaction to excessive pressure. Stress imposed on students by the examination system has many negative impacts. Students suffering from stress notice:

- constant fatigue
- forgetfulness
- poor appetite
- social withdrawal
- increased heart rate
- blurred vision
- muscle pain with no apparent reason
- headaches and blurred vision

Over long periods of time, stress such as the one resulting from school examinations can have severe negative health impacts:

- higher risk of coronary disease
- higher risk of obesity
- higher risk of smoking
- increased blood pressure
- weakened immune system
- higher risk of death

The excessive workload placed on the arms of the youngest and most vulnerable members of our society is taking its toll. The number of young people that call ChildLine in the UK and who seek help from exam stress increased by 323% between 2004 and 2017. Last school year, over 3,100 students called for help, including a worrying percentage of children aged 11 years and younger. Students often have no other way to seek help and escape from excessive pressure that our examination system puts on them.

All debt in the system is essentially controlled. The student loans are administered by the state with only one objective: to force young people into debt. As adults, they would need to accept low pay jobs they do not like, fuelling the economy by their sweat and blood. The individual is assimilated into the system for the rest of their life, leaving all their dreams, aspirations and hopes behind. It is a human right to spend the precious time granted to us on this world in a way we find the most fulfilling. But we are forced to give up our talents and become somebody else. Taking away one's freedom to decide about their life is *slavery*. We are not your slaves.

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to note that the cuts to education coincide with the decline of industry in the US. Factories leave the States to find cheaper workforce in East Asia or Southern America. The government's goal is to retain the manufacturing sector in the country at any cost to maintain the nation's economy. The government intentionally keeps the standard of education at state schools as low as possible, so that once the students leave school, their only choice would be employment in the industry for minimal wage, for the rest of their lives. This is not a new idea. The core mechanisms that the state uses change little throughout the centuries. In 1845, Friedrich Engels in his *The Condition of the Working Class in England* pointed out that the same strategy was being adopted in the United Kingdom during the downfall of industrial production. He wrote:

“Since the bourgeoisie vouchsafes [workers] only so much of life as is absolutely necessary, we need not wonder that it bestows upon them only so much education as lies in the interest of the bourgeoisie; and that, in truth, is not much”.

Little has changed since. We are seeing Western governments making cuts on the public schooling system and deliberately undereducated their people to keep the economy running.

Student Loans

Recent decades have seen student loans escalate throughout the world, as post-secondary education becomes less and less available to the majority. In the United States, the last decade saw the tuition fees on universities double. Student debt has grown to almost 900 billion dollars in 2015, about a five-fold increase since 2005. The days when university student could afford to pay for college and afford a small apartment or a car is long gone, as most university students find themselves in debt for the rest of their lives. Today, 80% of US students work, leaving less time for studying.

Student stress only gets worse on universities. A study on the University of Hertfordshire found that 21% of the students suffered from depression, 12% from insomnia and 8% from panic attacks.

A combination of these factors can have devastating consequences for students and their families. In South Korea, as in many other industrially-developed nations of the world, suicide is the second most common cause of death among teenagers between the ages of 10 and 19. There even is even a special Korean term – *ipsi-jeonjaeng* – which literally means “entrance exam war”. This war has brought countless casualties. Prime reasons for suicide among teens include the feelings of hopelessness, social isolation, depression and high expectations, all of which are by-products of a school system where grades determine careers and lives. The education system must accept the responsibility for the health of its students.

In a desperate struggle to pass exams that may mean whether a student will end up employed or in the job centre, an increasing number of students use banned drugs to boost their performance. Noopept has become a popular choice for many around the world. But students on the internet now report various unexpected side effects including depression, bad mood, inability to sleep, headaches, allergic reactions and others. In China, concerns were recently raised over students being routinely administered amino acids intravenously to improve their performance. Does the long-praised capitalist argument “the strongest wins” stand true? Or is it the most desperate that wins?

Students indeed have good reasons to be worried about their future. In the European Union, 26 million are unemployed while 120 million people live in poverty. Unemployment of youths between 18 and 35 years exceeds 50% in some European countries, the EU average is 25%. As the degree of automation proceeds and as more and more jobs are being replaced by machines, some sociologists expect that in a matter of decades a new class of the poor will emerge. Some suggest that up to 80% of humanity will ultimately find itself unemployed without any useful role to play in the soci-

ety. Competition for jobs will escalate more than ever before and so will the competition for grades and the associated adverse health effects.

We have fabricated a system in which passing exams has become a universal measure of how good or bad people are. Those who score worse in their exams, even only by a few points face a life long of social rejection. Not everyone is a study type and not everyone is strong in sitting exams. In recent years, the numbers of students passing standardised exams is in decline. Currently, the pass rate for the GCSEs in Britain dropped to only 66%. This means that every third student fails the exam. In Japanese, the word *rojin* is used for students who failed to pass exams. *Rojin* otherwise means a lost Samurai without a master. It is quite easy to get the idea that those who do not fit into the tight corset of the system, are not treated well.

Inequality

From a young age, children are sorted into categories based on what the teachers think they are capable of. We often attend different classes and different sets because of what the teachers believe is the best. Recommendations of teachers in primary school can influence the student's acceptance to a secondary school and ultimately the rest of their life. The school system gives everybody standardised exams. But giving all students the same tests is inheritably unequal. Every person has a different family background, a different life story and no exam can ever account for that. The grading system in school teaches young kids that some people are "better" than others. That some people are smart and others are stupid. That some of people are entitled to a great future, but other aren't. That some people are the masters and others are the slaves. The class system in schools indoctrinates some children into feeling inferior to others, while others start believing they are better than the rest. And it is this belief that the education system nurtures, the belief

creased from £60,000 to £160,000 just in 2012 and the trend is true for other schools too. Nationwide statistics are no less impressive. In the decade from 2002, exam fees paid by schools in the UK increased by 113%. Spending on exam fees now ranks as the second largest expenditure in secondary school. Students attending schools with a smaller budget may not be able to afford education of this standard. Without qualified teachers, resources or career advice, success is a privilege for the wealthy. This education system proved to be very efficient in creating an unequal society, where a few oligarchs accumulate wealth, while the living standards of the majority are in a steady decline. As such, the education industry assumed a new role – the divider of our society.

Families with more resources can afford to send their children to private schools, creating a deep income segregation from the beginnings of the children's life's. In fact, students attending a private school have a higher chance to land in elite jobs than their counterparts from public schools. Students from lower-class families are less likely to obtain a bachelor degree than their counterparts from the middle- and high-class.

Who Benefits from the Cuts?

President Trump recently called for a \$9.2 billion education cut in 2018. This represents 13.5% of the entire education budget. Teacher training, education for children from poorer backgrounds and literacy programs will be targeted the most. This downsizing of funds for education is nothing new, the standard of teaching in the States has been in steady decline for years. Since July 2008, some 324 000 education jobs in the country were lost. According to the OCED, the US will be the only industrial nation in the world in which the young generation will receive worse education than their parents.

Why does the state introduce cuts? Who benefits from them? The official version is austerity. But at the same time, it is curious

anyone. The artificially high costs of educational material is a clear violation of the Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that guarantees everyone the right to freely participate in scientific advancement.

So that students could not resell their used textbooks, the exam boards “update” them almost annually. These updates consist of nothing more but either deleting or adding a handful of pages. Moreover, some publishers are now cooperating with individual schools to produce textbooks tailor-made for that particular school or a particular course. This fills the exam board’s and the school’s pockets and helps drain more money from their students without benefiting their learning at all.

Nevertheless, it is often practically impossible to revise effectively for examinations such as the GCSE, IB, A-levels, SATS and many others. Although the actual topics are covered in class, the wording and subject of many questions is deliberately misleading and unfamiliar to the students. Official resources certified by the exam boards include much easier questions than the actual exam, as I personally noticed many times. If one revises for exams only with the certified materials, the result will not be very good. To efficiently prepare for the actual exams, students must go through past papers. However, to access them most examination boards charge prohibitively high fees and give free access to only a few specimen papers. The only way a student can obtain a past paper is to use untrustworthy pirate webpages.

III The Commercialisation of Education

Education as a Privilege

The lust for profit of exam boards and education firms has one more implication: students from poorer backgrounds have a much lower chance of doing well in the exams. As an example, the spending of the Phoenix High School in west London on exam fees in-

that some people are less valuable than others, that opens the door for the unequal society of today.

Indoctrination

Public schools are institutions set up to fulfill the government’s agenda. It would be very naïve to believe that these institutions are set up to simply do good. The ruling elites act purely out of self-interest.

There is general agreement that education should be independent of political opinion. So why are teacher education, schooling institutions and learning materials regulated so tightly by the government? Spending the first quarter of their life in school, children are taught to do exactly as they are told. They are taught to accept and obey universally true facts that always come from a higher authority (the teacher). They are taught that official figures and accounts are always correct and that large established media agencies are the most trusted source of information. Focus on life skills, civil freedoms and liberties is diminished. The most obedient pupils are rewarded. Like this, the state prepares another generation that will comply with its norms. Once they leave school most adults are unable to question authority, unable to think outside of the box and make their own analytical observations about the nature of events and are unable to find a meaning in life besides what is proposed by the government’s conventions or religious gurus. The education system only produces people smart enough to repeat what they were told by others.

A study performed by professor Kyung Hee Kim from the College of William and Marry in Virginia involved children from kindergarten up to the 12th grade. The study found that children were becoming less imaginative, creative, humorous, emotionally expressive, less lively, less passionate, less unconventional, less perceptive and less likely to “see things from a different angle”.

Since the introduction of the No Child Left Behind act, all military recruiters have free access to US high schools. These professionally trained head hunters convince young people to join the armed forces. Adults that take up military service have a higher risk of stress, substance abuse and suicide. These devastating health effects are especially pronounced in young soldiers. This is an example of how the government uses its most vulnerable citizens and exploits them only for the sake of its own geopolitical interest.

Recent research has also shown that large corporations such as Shell and BP are sponsoring “education programmes” for primary schools that paint a very rosy picture of the oil industry and fossil fuels and have been accused of altering facts about climate change.

The school system is systematically eroding the intellectual standard of the nation. The long-term impacts of this capitalist education system, can be best seen in the United States. Here, 40.4% of the population holds a college degree. But despite this, most of the population is critically undereducated. Literacy is defined as the ability to read, write, understand, communicate and analyse. But only 13% of the population achieve literacy proficiency, meaning they can compare and analyse data. Only 13% of the population is able to think critically.

II The Industry

Exam Boards

Who benefits from a system like this? The teachers and the school? No, they do not. In fact, teachers – the workers of the education industry – suffer as much as their students do. A review of psychological research published in the journal *Educational Research* highlighted that in fact, teachers belong among the most stressful occupations. Teacher stress and burnout were initially rare in the 1970s, but throughout the decades they have become a problem of international importance. More psychological problems

Schools and universities are marketed as brands or as shops, where anyone can buy whatever they desire. In this case, it is college degrees, prestige and a head start into a successful profession. Under capitalism, learning is secondary in the process of education. To attract as many students as possible, universities have huge spending on building lavish sports facilities, student accommodation and communal areas. Between 2016 and 2017, the construction spending of some American universities rose by up to 91.4%. There is no real reason for these facilities apart from extracting money from the students. Since the spending on construction works is so high, universities must decrease their funding for teaching and research. This goes exactly against the purpose of education. In the past, colleges used to be the epicentres of scientist research. How can we afford to make cuts on research in a world where every single ecological system is in decline and where 20 million die annually of preventable diseases? The capitalist school is a playground and a degree-making factory, but is far from providing its students with useful life skills. In a system where schools and institutions are run for private profit, it would be unwise to expect anything different.

Textbook Publishing

Another good example of the corporate power in education is the textbook industry. According to The Student Public Interest Research Groups, an American university student spends about \$900 on textbooks making up almost 20% of the total tuition fees. Textbooks must be certified by an appropriate examination board and some specialised academic books such as those published by large houses like Elsevier, Springer or Willey-Blackwell may cost well over \$100 dollars each. Subscription to some of the most influential scientific and academic journals generally costs over \$1000. At the same time, small groups of motivated scientists are publishing journals of equal quality free of any charge and available online to

Education Inc.

Another group of organisations that profits from education includes the various owners and operators of private educational facilities. The commercialised education industry promises a constant supply of customers and high revenues for everyone involved. The privatisation of many education institutions across the globe gave rise to a new class of the super-rich – the school owners. Their wealth is very difficult to track down. According to Forbes, it has become the norm that the richest men in any country own a handful of universities each. In effect, their schools are run as businesses where profit is the prime objective. Even in schools that are registered as not-for-profit, capital is a key driver. Fees in non-profit universities in the United States rose by 28% in the decade to 2012. At the same time, teaching (which after all should be the main goal of any school) represents on average only 26% of universities' expenses, according to the National Centre for Education Statistics 2012 statistics. We can easily imagine where the rest of the money flows.

As can be seen in the table below, private education professionals that work for exam boards and education syndicates earn disproportionately more than their colleagues in the public sector. Commercial exam boards and education firms bring almost no benefit to the society, yet they are consistently rewarded with dazzling salaries. The president of the most prominent exam board in the USA, the College Board, earns a \$550,000 base salary with about \$750,000 on top as bonuses. College Board's executives make \$355,271 per year. The highest paid Edexcel director earns £240,000 annually. That is £100,000 more than the Prime Minister of Great Britain. A president of a college in the United States enjoys an average annual salary of over \$531,817 million, according to a report by The Chronicle of Higher Education. On the other hand, public education is facing major cuts. A public primary school teacher in the US receives an average of only \$43,697.

follow. According to the College of Business and Hotel Management, in Central Europe teachers belong among the top five occupations most likely to lean towards alcoholism. We must also bear in mind, that teachers are not a particularly well-paid occupation. In the United Kingdom, teachers earn less than the UK salary average. This places teachers on a highway to self-harm and ultimately, they will become as abraded as the textbooks they use.

If not the schools, then who profits from this system? The state together with a wide array of for-profit organisations. The examination boards are among the most influential. Exam boards organise tests that are sat by millions of students every year around the world. Some of the most prominent English language examination boards with global reach are based in Britain. The British government supported a massive monopolisation of the examination industry, so today only a few closely competing boards exist. On the Isles, only seven closely competing exam boards exist, the students often left with no choice.

Education has changed into a profitable business and learning into passing exams. The profits generated by exam boards are huge. For example, the Graduate Management Admission Council that prepares the GMAT test that is taken in 113 countries annually collects \$87.7 million just on fees. This generates a profit of \$45.7 million. That is 11 times higher than Apple's profit margins. Without taking a GMAT exam, students will not meet the entry requirements for 2,100 of the world's best business schools. Similarly, the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) has an annual turnover of £159 million. AQA's chief executive enjoys a salary of £128 000. The highest paid director in Edexcel earns £240,000 annually. That is £100,000 more than the Prime Minister of Great Britain. Is this fair when many European families are struggling to afford paying their children school lunches? The education system is nothing but a profitable industry. And the students are the commodity.

These exam boards capitalise off student's physical and mental health as well as off their family's wellbeing. The exam boards say they want to create equal testing for everyone. But they themselves hoard huge profits. They gain most of these profits from taxpayer's money in times of austerity when the public sector is suffering major cuts. It is time for real education equality.

The more students that take exams, the more profit for the examination boards. This means that exam boards have a financial interest in their students failing so they could retake the exam. In other words, exam boards make the tests so hard that they can hardly be passed. Students that fail are required to retake the exams paying more for schooling, private tuition, certified textbooks and certified workbooks.

How can an exam board make students fail their tests? It is common praxis now, that students are confronted with excessively hard questions in their exams. For the past several years, it has become routine that exam boards include questions that are not related to the subject at all. In 2016 and 2017, students regularly complained about their GCSE Biology exams containing questions that were not related to biology at all. Likewise, students often argue over the fact, that many questions are worded poorly, rendering them understandable. Although a student may be well able in maths, without understanding a poorly worded problem, they will not earn the grades. This is a serious discrimination against many foreign students, for whom English is not their first language. It is not only deeply unethical, it is a sabotage of the student's progress.

Moreover, students are often forced to take simply too many courses. The current system assumes that school must occupy most if not all of the student's free time. School teaches students that all their hobbies, talents, everything that you do with love and care will be useless in their future life. The modern exam system removes individuality and suppresses creativity. Students are even graded in arts. Is it even possible to grade art? If arts were always

graded, some of the most amazing paintings and sculptures would never be made.

The actual marking of some exams is more than controversial. Marking hundreds of thousands of papers creates an administrative chaos. Exam boards have increasing problems finding qualified markers to grade the tests. This leads to variable exam grades that make the whole system questionable. It often happens that papers simply get "lost" or "put into wrong envelopes", as Mark Dawe, board chief of OCR admits. How is the existence of exam boards justified if they fail to accurately mark their candidate's tests?

It has even been speculated that exam boards intentionally falsify the results of the tests and give their students a lower grade than they deserve. Why? Because once you receive your graded test back, you can apply for a remarking. This means that your paper will go through the marking process again and you will receive a new grade. Keep in mind, that it is often only one mark that decides whether a student will be accepted for university or not. Of course, a fee must be paid to remark the paper. If exam boards systematically lie and give their candidates suspiciously low scores, there is a higher chance they will apply for a remarking and more profit will end in the exam board's pocket. The exam boards do not publish statistics about their remarking activities. I selectively compiled data from studentroom.co.uk, an online forum where students often discuss their experiences with remarking. If mistakes in marking only happen by accident, we would expect that the percentage of students ending up with a higher grade would be similar to that of students receiving a lower grade. But as shown in the bar graph, in most of the cases the remarking resulted into a higher grade. This is the most definitive proof that upon the first grading, the exam board intentionally marks the students down.

The outrage over exam boards falsifying the tests grades resulted into a student petition to the government of the United Kingdom. The petition was called "Ban guess marking", but unfortunately was not successful.