An exposure of high-stakes testing in Australia's public schools

Beautiful Failures by Lucy Clark

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Journalist Lucy Clark has written an important book. *Beautiful Failures* reveals the impact of an education system driven by test results, becoming narrow and mechanical, stripping today's youth of creativity and critical thinking, and creating unprecedented levels of stress and anxiety among students, parents and teachers.

Clark, currently a senior editor at the *Guardian Australia*, has worked for 31 years in Sydney, London and New York as a literary editor, features writer and opinion columnist. Her exploration of the education system was driven by her own experiences as the parent of a child who suffered crippling stress and anxiety throughout the last two years of school in Australia. For her daughter, she explains, "the prospect of going to school—sometimes even the thought of going outside—was like an enormous mountain to climb."

"By all the standard markers, by all the accepted rules and regulations and assessments of secondary school," she writes, her daughter was a failure.

Although friends tried to comfort Clark with suggestions that school was "not for everyone" and that many young people went on to lead successful lives, she resisted such complacency. "The more I thought about it, the more this seemed like a pathetic surrender to a questionable idea that deserved more scrutiny: shouldn't school be for everyone?"

As she began to probe more deeply, Clark found a general consensus that "education is broken" and had been for some time. And this was "not only for students. Teachers and principals are reporting unprecedented levels of stress, distress, abuse and burnout. The stories make your toes curl."

Clark begins her book with a description of a worrying yet insightful artwork by an Australian high school student, Clare, protesting against the horrendous levels of stress she and her friends underwent while preparing for their year 12, NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) examination. Clare had submitted her artwork for the final art examination. At the work's centre sits a faceless woman surrounded by a grey and crimson patchwork, which, on closer inspection, contains tiny quotes from students expressing their feelings of anger, frustration and alienation.

According to Clark this was "… a figure with no identity surrounded by the eloquently expressed distress of today's teens." She cites a few examples of the students' quotes: "I'm so proud of myself for not crying today. On the first day I thought the tears were never going to stop…" "You would think that, due to the amount of clinical depression and anxiety in youth, the school system would have changed something." "When you speak out and say you're stressed the majority of teachers say, 'Oh it's the HSC, everyone is,' … I just hate how we are disregarded."

Clare's accounts of students' discussions with teachers about expectations for the final exams gave the impression that "some kind of trauma was taking place—students running crying from rooms and sobbing in the schoolyard."

The pressure of achieving good marks in the HSC exams was instilling in young people the fear that if they didn't do well they would never achieve anything: "That magic number you've been working towards for years, the one we've been saying holds the key to future success? Sorry, but with these efforts it just might be out of reach."

Clark notes that in Australia, the pressure is worsening through the national standardised testing regime, NAPLAN, where children are graded in English and Mathematics in years 3, 5, 7 and 9.

The results from NAPLAN are published online and used to measure the performance of each school. More than ever, school teachers are under pressure to make their students "test ready." Clark refers to a study by the Whitlam Institute in Western Sydney and the University of Melbourne, which found that "90 percent of teachers reported students feeling stressed, being sick, crying or having sleepless nights. 72 percent of teachers felt negative about NAPLAN."

In this system, Clark finds, where the emphasis is more and more geared towards academic performance and grades, mental health problems are on the rise and more and more children are refusing to take part, either by open rebellion or passive disengagement in the classroom. She cites the results of a 2015 Gallup poll, which surveyed 7,300 kids in years 5–12. It found that by the time students reached year 12, half were disengaged, just one-third had any confidence that they would get a good job, 15 percent felt actively discouraged and 37 percent felt "stuck."

Clark cites Jan Owen, CEO of the Foundation for Young Australians, who believes that young Australian students are voting with their feet, because they don't have a say and feel disconnected and isolated from the system. They are given no solution to their increasing levels of stress and are often blamed for their own disengagement.

"And that, to me, is why we've got a mental health epidemic—we spend $10.6 billion a year … on mental health, because we've atomised them and said, 'It's basically your problem; you need to pull up your socks and work it out.' And it's genuinely not their problem."

This is particularly unacceptable, Owen says, "[i]n the most complex time of change and uncertainty on the planet, climate change, poverty—you name it."

In what Clark refers to as the "push down" phenomenon, she raises that the system of standardised testing pushes the pressure to obtain good marks or grades downwards onto parents and teachers, who pass it on to the students, all the way down into the early years.

Clark interviewed the mother of a first grader, for example, whose child was not reaching the required outcomes for that grade level, leading the school to suggest that the child had a problem, perhaps requiring a special "diagnosis." The mother was certain that her child's development was

normal, but, she said, “They want all these kids to be reaching these goalposts at the same time, and their brains are all different and girls are different from boys, and within that, some kids are just different and learn at different rates.”

This position is supported by many educational experts, who believe that children in the early years should not be engaged in formal learning at all, and that creativity and unstructured play are fundamental to early childhood brain development. In 2013, a group of 120 experts in Britain called for formal learning to be delayed for up to two years, to give children a chance to develop basic social skills through running, playing and creating. One of the signatories, a senior psychology lecturer, pointed to neuroscientific studies that found playful activity supports children’s’ brain development “more powerfully than direct instruction.” Studies have also shown a clear link between the loss of play opportunities in the second half of the twentieth century, and increased stress and mental health problems.

Research also suggests that placing the sole emphasis on academic achievement or “outcomes” can actually harm intellectual development in the long term. Clark spoke to Alfie Kohn, prominent author and education activist, who says that research has found that the focus on results produces “extrinsic” motivation, where students narrow their own focus down to getting the marks they need to achieve. Kohn believes that grades should be abolished altogether.

“Every moment kids are trying to get a distinction or an A is a moment when they are not focused on the ideas themselves. And then it creates this vicious circle, because the less intrinsic motivation they have to learn, the more it seems necessary to use extrinsic inducements—that is, bribes and threats—to make them do what they are no longer interested in doing.”

To reinforce the system of testing and compound the pressure, Clark explores the unprecedented growth of private tutoring businesses that are aimed at children to increase their test performance tests. Such tutoring can begin from the age of 1, as parents attempt to prepare their children for the years of testing ahead. Largely unaware of what constitutes a “good” education, many parents are driven by the fear that their child will be left behind, so try to find ways to get their children into the “best” schools.

Clark also reviews the impact that the current system has on teachers. She refers to the widely-shared Facebook comments by Kathy Margolis, an Australian teacher of 30 years standing who decided to quit teaching at the end of 2015. Margolis attacked the focus on testing, which narrowed the curriculum, increased teacher workloads and put them under constant scrutiny, undermining their professionalism and “slowly sucking the joy” from teaching.

Margolis’ experience supports research done in Australia, which, in 2014, found that one in four new teachers suffered from emotional exhaustion and burnout. According to Clark, school principals, responsible for enforcing government policy, reported double the burnout rate, and were seven times more likely to be assaulted than a person in the general population.

What began for Clark as a personal response from an exhausted, exasperated parent has evolved into a thorough piece of investigative journalism. In the course of her research, she widened her scope to the international arena, speaking to parents and educators in the US, the UK, Asia and Europe. The stories, she writes, were the same.

Clark’s book reveals that high-stakes testing is an international tendency with countries constantly attempting to increase their “performance” and “competitiveness.” In fact, the system of standardised testing and rankings, so roundly condemned by experts, became endorsed internationally with the launch in 1997 of the OECD’s PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). PISA—“the mother of all races,” Clark calls it—tests 15-year-old students in OECD countries every three years and ranks the countries based on their performance in the test. Its first survey was in 2000. Apart from Finland, which Clark explores in some detail in the book and to which we will return later, those at the top are almost always in East Asia, for example, in Shanghai and Hong Kong (which are classified as independent economic zones), Singapore and South Korea.

Clark raises the point that although the East Asian countries perform well in the PISA tests, they also tend to have rigid education systems that are heavy on rote-based memorisation in preparation for testing. South Korea, Clark says, is the only country in the world that is 100 percent literate, but many students are placed under brutal schooling and tutoring regimes to get there. She interviews Amanda Ripley, author of *The Smartest Kids in the World: And How They Got That Way*, which reveals the “shocking” story of the South Korean education system where performing well in exams, in order to be admitted to one of the three universities, “drives everything.” There has been an explosion of private tutoring schools in South Korea, many of which are open until midnight. Essentially, students attend school for around 16 hours each day. Of course, this system favours the wealthy, who can afford to send their children to tutoring schools.

South Korea also has the highest rate of increase in youth suicide rates in the world. A 2014 survey of school students there found that many were depressed, due to school pressure and future uncertainty, and more than half reported that they’d had suicidal thoughts. One former student described the education system as “child abuse.” According to Clark, there are similarities in Taiwan and China. One father spoke about how children were often discouraged from taking music lessons or other creative pursuits, because they might become a distraction from exam preparation.

Clark’s research is comprehensive and informative, but there are important issues that she presents uncritically or ignores.

As an alternative to the system of testing, Clark highlights Finland. Finland consistently features high in the PISA rankings—it ranked 6th overall in 2015—and, according to Clark, stands as the “polar opposite” of the East Asian model. She writes that Finland is the perfect example of how education system should be run: education is free and government-run; it focuses on whole child development from the early years; children don’t start school until they are 6–7-years-old; there is no high-stakes testing until the very end of high school; teachers are highly valued professionals and have greater autonomy; and it is heavily focused on developing creativity through the arts.

As far as Clark is concerned, Finland’s model should be adopted all over the world. Whilst it is certainly a more progressive approach to education, however, it cannot be studied outside of its historical and international context.

Clark’s attitude to Finland reflects the attempts by various pseudo-left political tendencies to present the Scandinavian countries as representative of a more “humane” capitalism, or examples of what capitalism can achieve when run by “progressive” politicians, with excesses controlled by state regulation (see: “Bernie Sanders and the Scandinavian Model”).

The improved economic conditions within the Scandinavian countries following World War II, however, were the result of hard-fought struggles by a militant working class that was heavily influenced by the Russian Revolution of 1917. Increased wages, maternity benefits, generous sick leave and pensions were not granted willingly by a more progressive and humane bourgeoisie, but extracted by workers from a ruling class made nervous by the prospect of socialist revolution. Moreover, these concessions were only possible due to the exceptional economic and political conditions in the immediate post World War II era.

Since the 1980s, however, politics in the Scandinavian countries has shifted further to the right, under conditions of the worst global economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Finland has not been exempt from the growth of social inequality, which lies at the heart of the

decline in educational outcomes. Promoting its education model as one that other governments can be pressured to adopt, is to promote a reactionary reformist illusion.

Clark also misrepresents the agenda underlying NAPLAN and its promotion by the former Labor education minister and prime minister, Julia Gillard. She writes: "Like most measurements, it began with good intentions, as a diagnostic tool: let's find out who needs help and help them. It's a goal that seems almost laughable now, because NAPLAN has instead become a blunt political tool and an instrument of torture for many children, parents and teachers."

While it is correct that teachers have historically used testing as a diagnostic tool in the classroom, NAPLAN was not established with "good intentions" and its aim was never to improve students' literacy and numeracy skills. Introduced by Julia Gillard as education minister during the Rudd Labor government in 2009, it was, from the very outset, a mechanism for attacking public education, cutting funding and closing schools, as part of a political agenda of austerity and privatisation.

The NAPLAN system is modelled on education regimes in the US and UK, where standardised testing results have already been used to victimise and sack teachers, close down "low performing" schools, or hand them over to the private sector to be run as profit-making enterprises.

Far from improving students' academic results, these systems have served to further increase social inequality. Those schools targeted for closure are inevitably situated in poor communities.

Both the NAPLAN testing regime and the *My School* website have been widely opposed by teachers, parents and students. In 2010, the Australian Education Union (AEU) and its state affiliates called off a national boycott by teachers of the test and have since played a crucial role in covering up the governments' real aims. They have actively prevented teachers from developing a unified struggle against the measures and overseen the drive towards a more rigid testing regime tied to teacher and school performance.

As a long-time journalist and senior editor with the *Guardian*, Clark cannot have been unaware of these events. Yet nowhere in her book does she mention Julia Gillard or attempt to deal with the role played by the Australian Labor Party and the unions in initiating the drive to stultify public education and stifle any opposition.

Clark also promotes the "Gonski" model, which, again, was introduced by Labor and backed by the unions and the Greens. But Gonski is a fraud. It waved the carrot of increased funding at disadvantaged schools (which was grossly inadequate and is unlikely to ever materialise) while lending credibility to the NAPLAN testing regime and favouring a more open tying of test results to teachers' performance, undermining their income and their job security.

Clark does make clear that there is growing opposition to the current direction of public education. She raises that in May 2014, more than 100 education experts from around the world wrote an open letter to PISA head, Andreas Schleicher, calling on him to cancel the international ranking system because it increased reliance on standardised tests in the classroom, shifted policy thinking to short-term fixes, and "narrowed the collective imagination about what education should be about." The experts also claimed that, as an economic organisation, the OECD was naturally inclined to look only at the "economic role" of schools. Fundamentally, they wrote, the constant cycle of globalised testing "harms our children and impoverishes our classrooms."

While powerfully exposing some of the main problems plaguing the public education system, in Australia and internationally, Clark fails to even explore, let alone answer, the most critical question: Why?

Interestingly, she asks "why change in education is so hard, so slow, and why these great things aren't spreading like a crazy virus." But there she stops. One is forced to conclude that behind her failure to probe the issue lie political considerations. And that is because any genuine investigation would expose the culpability of the Labor Party, the unions, and their pseudo-left supporters in implementing and defending the very regressive measures that Clark attacks. This is a can of worms that Clark is either unwilling or unable to open.

Instead, after rather pathetically urging a "community wide" push for educational reform, Clark ultimately concludes that her idea of a perfect education system is simply a "utopia" and the perfect school just "a mythical place down the road." So we end up with a work that reveals an education system proven to be harmful to the interests of young people, but then leads its readers into a political dead end.

This is because the global crisis in public education is not the product of the short-sightedness of politicians or the ignorance of education authorities. It is the product of the deepening crisis of the capitalist profit system itself. All the social rights of the working class, including public education are being sacrificed to the drive to slash government spending, implement austerity and open up public institutions, across all sectors, to the predations of big business, turning them into profit-making enterprises.

The only way to halt this process is to put an end to capitalism. And that requires the development of a unified, international movement of the working class, politically independent from all the bourgeois parties and the trade unions and based on a socialist program, to expropriate the major banks, corporations and utilities, and place them under its own, democratic control, in the interests of the vast majority, not the parasitic appetites of a tiny super-rich minority.