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Beyond Involution and Flatness: the Dilemma of Youth Mentality and Educational Solutions

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Abstract: "Involution" and "lying flat", as typical psychological phenomena among contemporary youth groups, reflect the deep contradiction between the alienation of educational competition and the dilemma of individual development in modern society. Recent research reveals that "involution" is essentially a profound phenomenon of labor alienation under intense institutional competition, manifested primarily as ineffective internal consumption driven by rigid quantitative indicators and hyper-competitive academic environments. Conversely, "laying flat" emerges as young people's strategic, albeit passive, resistance to overwhelming structural pressure and diminishing returns on their educational investments. Both of these contrasting yet interconnected behavioral patterns originate from deeply rooted institutional factors, such as a highly singular evaluation system, rigid pathways to success, and the increasingly uneven distribution of educational and socioeconomic resources. To address these pressing challenges, this study proposes a multifaceted approach centered on fostering genuine individual growth and dismantling systemic barriers. By building a "comprehensive human development" educational ecology and actively promoting a more balanced, equitable allocation of educational resources across different regions and demographics, society can effectively mitigate these negative psychological trends. Ultimately, implementing these targeted educational solutions will successfully guide the healthy development of young people's social mentality, foster resilience, and provide crucial foundational support for cultivating a new generation of capable individuals who are fully prepared to take on the profound responsibility of national rejuvenation and sustainable societal progress.

Keywords: involution; lying flat; youth mentality; educational alienation; resource allocation

1. "Involution" and "Lying Flat": Alienation, Resistance and Structural Causes

In the current spectrum of youth social mentality, "involution" and "lying flat" constitute two core symptoms that appear to be opposite but actually have the same origin. From a theoretical perspective, "involution" can be understood as a kind of institutionalized internal competition, the essence of which is the manifestation of alienated effort in the fields of education and social competition. It drives individuals into a zero-sum or even negative-sum game, transforming the initiative that should serve human development into a pursuit of quantitative indicators (such as grade points and academic qualifications). The young people in this situation not only have a clear understanding and empathy for the plight of themselves and their companions, but also feel powerless against structural constraints, falling into deep contradictions [1].

"Lying flat" is a strategic response when this alienation develops to a certain stage. It is not a purely negative compromise, but a rational choice for survival under the perception of narrowing space for class mobility and the unequal distribution of value [2]. When young people realize that high-intensity efforts have not only failed to exchange for equal development space, but have instead reinforced their role as tools for systemic output, they may adopt the method of "reducing participation" and "shrinking desire" to silently disengage. However, this stance does not address the underlying dynamics within

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the existing structure and may even be transformed into a new mechanism for screening "efficient contributors," limiting its potential for meaningful change.

Its formation is the result of the interweaving of multiple factors such as system, culture and cognition:

At the institutional and cultural level, the convergence of quantitative evaluation and utilitarian culture constitutes the direct driving force. On the one hand, the education and social evaluation system relies too much on quantifiable hard indicators and falls into the misunderstanding of "academic qualifications," forcing competition to be reduced to a zero-sum game of scores and titles. On the other hand, utilitarian culture narrows education into a tool for class advancement, dissolving its spiritual core of educating individuals [1, 3]. Institutional pressure and cultural orientation reinforce each other and jointly build a solid field of "involution."

At the level of cognition and development, there is a profound contradiction between the rapid growth of knowledge and the limitations of thinking. Human knowledge is being metabolized and updated at an unprecedented rate, which requires individuals to have a mindset of lifelong learning and pioneering innovation [4]. However, the reality is that when new fields and new models emerge, participants often rush in quickly and turn it into a saturated space. Competition then degenerates into fierce rivalry for existing resources and internal consumption. Large investments do not produce new substantial value. This is a typical manifestation of "involution" in the era of knowledge economy.

2. Realistic Criticism and Value Guidance of Youth Educational Alienation

2.1. The Alienated Nature of "Involution" and Criticism of Educational Commodification

2.1.1. The Concrete Presentation of Educational Alienation

In the campus environment, grade point competition has become a prominent example of educational alienation. Grade points have shifted from being a simple measure of academic performance to serving as a critical "passport" for postgraduate studies, international education, and employment opportunities. This emphasis on merit-based evaluation inevitably results in an unequal distribution of teaching resources and opportunities. Beyond grade points, competitions, internships, and academic papers also reflect irrational forms of competition [5, 6]. Such dynamics not only fail to enhance students' abilities but also lead them into a cycle of "self-consuming involution," diminishing their respect for knowledge as they focus excessively on quantitative metrics.

2.1.2. From Labor Alienation to Education Commodification

In the current field of higher education, the evaluation system with grade points and comprehensive tests as its core has been internalized into the shared expectations of students, teachers, schools, and even the entire education system [7]. Students often reduce their self-worth to the numerical representation of grade points. The learning process, which was originally aimed at personal growth and ability improvement, has been transformed into an instrumental behavior of simply pursuing scores due to the overwhelming emphasis on grade points. Grade points themselves have become a "symbol of value" that influences students' daily choices such as course selection and exam preparation. When this evaluation indicator is disconnected from the educational essence of "cultivating individuals with moral integrity" and no longer serves the goal of holistic education, a significant disconnection arises between students' learning practices and self-perception, eventually leading to a psychological state of alienation that is challenging to address.

2.1.3. The Multi-Dimensional Dilemma and Social Impact of Education Commercialization

At the individual level, students' excessive competition for grades has led to serious challenges in their mental well-being, creating a sense of emptiness in their inner world. Many students experience significant stress related to academic performance. In the process of prioritizing grades above all else, students gradually lose their intrinsic

motivation for learning and develop a sense of detachment from their educational journey. For individuals, the lack of meaningful recognition transforms learning, which should center on "knowledge," into a purely utilitarian pursuit. This shift reduces knowledge exploration to a numbers game, leaving individuals trapped in a state of diminished agency. Such detachment undermines the fundamental purpose of education, which is to "cultivate individuals with moral integrity," and prevents students from forming sound values and clear life goals.

At the educational level, the commercialization of education has disrupted the balance between quality and equity. The widespread presence of superficial courses and lenient grading practices has compromised the objectivity of educational evaluation [8]. Additionally, practices such as course retakes, grade inflation, and the trading of academic work have exacerbated inequalities in access to educational resources and opportunities. Many educators acknowledge that the current evaluation system fails to accurately reflect students' true abilities, and this systemic flaw continues to erode the foundation of higher education.

From a societal perspective, the intense focus on merit-based competition has created a significant disconnect between talent development and societal needs. In their pursuit of high academic scores, students often concentrate excessively on examination subjects, neglecting the development of well-rounded skills. This results in deficiencies in both innovation and practical abilities. In the realm of scientific research, the pressure to achieve quick results has led to a shortage of talent in foundational research, which in turn hampers progress in national innovation and development strategies [9]. This imbalance in the talent structure reflects a systemic issue rooted in the commercialization of education.

2.2. The Triple Narrative and Value Guidance of the "Lying Flat" Phenomenon

2.2.1. Triple Narrative of the "Lying Flat" Phenomenon

The first is to lie passively, which can be understood as an ideological compromise in the context of societal stratification. This group has lost their motivation in life, their confidence in pursuing goals, and has entered a state of resignation. Many feel unable to change their circumstances amidst intense social competition and systemic pressures, leading to a gradual erosion of their drive. Ultimately, they withdraw and become less engaged with the system, driven by a sense of helplessness and despair. The second is strategic lying down, which can be seen as a temporary withdrawal from the demands of capital-driven competition. These individuals view "lying flat" as a way to cope with the pressures of "involution" or as a defensive response to the fear of failure. Outwardly, they may advocate for or joke about "lying flat," oscillating between this mindset and the pressures of competition. However, deep down, they still aspire to succeed, reflecting the challenges they face in navigating societal expectations. Lastly, there is an "absolute" lying down, which represents a more deliberate and proactive lifestyle choice. For some, "lying flat" signifies a rejection of traditional success metrics and an embrace of personal freedom and inner peace. This group seeks to distance themselves from external pressures and create a life centered on their own values [10]. They intentionally slow down, focus on the essence of life, and find fulfillment in a more relaxed and self-directed approach.

2.2.2. Transform the Words of Lying Down into Demands for Fairness and Justice

The passivity and inaction attitude conveyed by "Lie Ping" contrasts sharply with mainstream values. The deeper issue is that "laying down" does not alter the competitive nature of limited resources. To compete for existing resources, participants must invest more time and energy, ultimately leading to a cycle of excessive competition. "Lying flat" may also negatively impact economic development [11]. As "lie down" evolves into a widespread social trend, it risks diminishing the drive and ambition of society as a whole. Innovation, a key driver of economic growth, could be suppressed by attitudes such as "laying flat," reducing creativity among young people and limiting societal vitality, thereby hindering sustainable economic development. Furthermore, in addressing challenges such as population aging, if young people—the primary contributors to

development—widely adopt "laying down," it may become difficult for them to assume necessary responsibilities, affecting the long-term transformation and development of society.

However, in examining the phenomenon of "lie flat," it is important not to focus solely on its negative aspects but to explore the underlying demands it reflects [1]. The essence of the "lie flat" discourse can be understood as a call from young people for fairness and equity. Those who choose to "lie down" are not inherently negative or unwilling to contribute, but rather are responding to perceived societal imbalances. The reality of an "imbalance between effort and reward" has led them to lose motivation, ultimately choosing "laying down" as a way to cope with challenges.

Transforming the discourse of "laying flat" into appeals for fairness and equity requires addressing these practical challenges. By improving social systems and fostering a fair competitive environment, individuals can participate in competition and access resources and opportunities based on their abilities [5]. Resolving these deeper issues of fairness and equity can help reverse the "laying down" mentality among young people, encouraging them to actively engage in societal development. This approach not only provides a platform for individual value realization but also mitigates excessive competition, supports healthy economic growth, and contributes to societal progress.

3. Exploration of Innovative Practical Paths to Abandon the Alienation of Youth Education

3.1. Individual Breakthrough and Growth in Involution

3.1.1. Clarify the Essential Difference between Hard Work and "Involution"

"Effort" represents a constructive and healthy behavioral pattern that aligns with the core principle of self-improvement [12]. It embodies a positive and progressive mindset, emphasizing self-growth, rational competition, and a clear understanding of gaps to identify directions for improvement. Through competition, individuals not only showcase their strengths but also challenge higher difficulties with a proactive attitude, achieving continuous self-breakthroughs. In contrast, "involution" diverges significantly from the fundamental goals of education. The competitive practices associated with involution are often excessive, irrational, and lack transparency. Such high-cost efforts typically result in abnormal growth, ultimately straying from the essential purpose of education, which is to foster the comprehensive development of individuals.

3.1.2. Grasp the Scale of Competition and Focus on Own Growth

"Lying flat" is often associated with a passive mindset, but the trajectory of societal development will not halt due to some individuals adopting such an approach. Rational competition remains the core driving force behind human progress [13]. It is essential for individuals to recognize the limitations of a passive mentality, overcome such constraints, and actively participate in societal advancement. In practice, people may find themselves navigating between passivity and excessive competition. Young individuals, in particular, should proactively seek opportunities for growth, adopt a constructive attitude toward competition, and prioritize their personal development. Through consistent effort and self-improvement, they can achieve meaningful progress and realize their potential.

3.1.3. Strengthen Personal Character Construction and Integrate into a Harmonious Personality Community

The socialization goal during youth is to achieve the harmonious integration of personal identity with the identity of others, and strengthening personal character construction is essential to accomplishing this objective. Building personal character requires not only careful learning and critical thinking to acquire new knowledge and expand cognitive boundaries but also a deep exploration of underlying issues. This involves using knowledge and analytical skills to establish a strong foundation of character. Additionally, self-reflection is crucial—remaining vigilant, restraining inappropriate desires and behaviors, regularly evaluating one's actions, addressing

shortcomings promptly, and cultivating character through self-discipline and iterative improvement. Achieving harmony between knowledge and action is equally important. It is necessary to bridge the gap between learning and application by integrating acquired knowledge and values with practical actions, validating understanding through practice, and aligning intentions with actions. Furthermore, individuals should focus on accumulating virtuous deeds, valuing even small acts of kindness. By starting with daily responsible actions, individuals can develop noble moral qualities through the consistent practice of positive thoughts and behaviors, leading to the continuous refinement of character. These efforts enable individuals to improve themselves, integrate more effectively into society, foster a harmonious personality community, achieve personal growth in challenging social environments, and contribute positively to the transformation of education.

3.2. Break the Shackles of Involution and Innovate the Education System

3.2.1. Balanced Resource Allocation Is an Important Basis for Cracking Educational Competition

To address the imbalance in resource distribution, the government should enhance investment in regions with limited educational resources, establish dedicated education funds, and upgrade school infrastructure. Additionally, efforts should focus on attracting and retaining exceptional teachers by improving their compensation and offering more training and career advancement opportunities. Leveraging internet technology to implement distance teaching and facilitate online resource sharing can also ensure that students in remote areas have access to high-quality courses. Achieving equitable allocation of educational resources is essential to alleviating the intense competition stemming from resource disparities, providing students with fair opportunities for development, and fostering their comprehensive growth.

3.2.2. Reforming the Enrollment System Is an Important Means to Reshape the Competitive Landscape of Education

The current score-oriented admissions system uses students' academic performance as a key indicator for selection, causing students, parents, and schools to place excessive emphasis on scores, fostering a "score-only" mindset [3]. Within this framework, students dedicate significant time and energy to repetitive learning, often neglecting the development of their personal interests and comprehensive abilities, thereby intensifying the phenomenon of excessive competition.

Adjusting the admissions system has become a pressing need. A diversified admissions evaluation framework should be established, incorporating students' academic performance, innovative capacity, practical skills, artistic literacy, social responsibility, and other comprehensive qualities. By creating comprehensive student profiles that document extracurricular activities, social practices, and achievements in scientific and technological innovation, a more holistic reference for college admissions can be provided. Additionally, promoting flexible enrollment and diversified admission models will allow higher education institutions to better align student selection with their unique characteristics and academic priorities. These adjustments aim to move beyond single-score competition, encourage diverse student development, and facilitate a shift from narrow academic focus to well-rounded growth.

3.2.3. Optimizing the Management System Is a Necessary Link to Release the Vitality of Educational Development

The current education management system exhibits a pronounced administrative tendency, which excessively influences school teaching activities and restricts teachers' flexibility in their instructional practices. Schools face limitations in designing curricula, selecting teaching methods, and arranging teaching schedules. They are often required to adhere to uniform standards and guidelines, making it challenging to adapt and innovate based on the specific needs of students and the unique characteristics of the school. This rigid structure not only hampers the enhancement of teaching quality but also reduces the

adaptability and initiative of schools and teachers in addressing challenges such as excessive competition and inefficiency [13].

To improve the education management system, it is essential to reduce the overreach of administrative departments in schools and provide institutions with greater flexibility in teaching-related decisions. Schools should be empowered to design curriculum plans tailored to the needs and characteristics of their students, offering specialized courses to cater to diverse learning requirements. Teachers should be encouraged to adopt innovative instructional methods and select approaches that inspire students' interest and creativity, based on the teaching content and students' learning conditions. Furthermore, a scientifically sound teacher evaluation system should be established, moving away from assessments solely based on student performance. This system should incorporate indicators such as teaching innovation and the holistic development of students, motivating educators to explore new approaches in education. By fostering a more supportive and adaptable learning environment, students can overcome excessive competition and achieve comprehensive development.

3.3. Build an Evaluation System for "Comprehensive Human Development"

3.3.1. Break the Alienation Dilemma and Reshape the Education Evaluation System

First, a multidimensional and three-dimensional evaluation system needs to be constructed. Incorporate process evaluation and qualitative evaluation into the core assessment dimensions and reduce the dominant position of performance points in student evaluation. Process evaluation focuses on students' performance throughout the learning process, such as learning attitude, classroom participation, and active exploration efforts [2, 14]. Qualitative evaluation emphasizes measuring students' comprehensive qualities, covering dimensions such as innovation ability, practical application ability, and teamwork ability. Through the integration of multiple evaluation methods, the true development status of students can be presented comprehensively and objectively, avoiding the one-sidedness of "evaluating students solely based on their scores."

Secondly, enhance the education system to support the transformation of higher education from "selective" to "developmental." Traditional selective education focuses on screening, which can lead students into a narrow focus on "scores only" and neglect their holistic growth. Developmental education, by contrast, aims to foster the individual growth of students and requires the establishment of a more equitable and scientific talent cultivation mechanism. This includes providing students with diverse talents personalized development paths, stimulating potential through flexible courses and specialized projects, and adhering to the principle of "teaching students in accordance with their aptitude."

Finally, reshaping educational values is essential. Students should be guided to develop a correct perspective on learning and values, returning to the core purpose of education: "cultivating individuals with moral integrity." Learning should not be limited to the pursuit of high grades but should also focus on improving comprehensive literacy, realizing self-worth, and achieving well-rounded development. By addressing the challenges posed by the commercialization of education and reestablishing its spiritual core, it is possible to nurture a new generation of individuals with both professional expertise and humanistic qualities, thereby laying a solid foundation for advancing educational goals.

3.3.2. Transform Rational Thinking and Promote All-Round Personal Development

The essence of education lies in the cultivation of individuals, with the ultimate goal of fostering holistic personal development. Education should not be confined to the unidirectional acquisition of knowledge; instead, it should emphasize the comprehensive enhancement of understanding human nature, nurturing inner character, and establishing a meaningful life. Students are encouraged to actively utilize the resources and opportunities provided by higher education to engage in profound self-exploration, identifying a career path they genuinely love and are committed to pursuing over the long term. This approach not only helps define the trajectory for personal value realization but

also enables students to experience a deep sense of fulfillment and accomplishment throughout their educational journey.

The core of this transformation involves shifting the perception of competition from merely a means to achieve utilitarian outcomes to a process of self-improvement and the realization of life's value [15]. In practical terms, students should strive to deepen and broaden their knowledge base, cultivate critical thinking and innovative skills, prioritize both physical and mental well-being, and develop strong moral character. The ultimate aim is to grow into well-rounded individuals who possess the capacity for lifelong learning and personal growth.

3.3.3. Create a Positive Atmosphere and Stimulate the Vitality of Educational Development

First, schools must scientifically design an evaluation system for teachers and students. For teachers, the single evaluation model of focusing solely on "scientific research" and "scores" needs to be replaced with a more comprehensive approach. This should include teaching quality, teaching innovation, personalized guidance, and care for students' well-being, encouraging teachers to prioritize the holistic development of students and actively engage in teaching improvements. For students, it is essential to move away from an exclusive emphasis on "scores" and establish diversified evaluation standards. While maintaining attention to academic foundations, greater emphasis should be placed on enhancing comprehensive skills and personal development, thereby creating opportunities for students with diverse talents to thrive.

Secondly, schools should aim to foster a sense of belonging among teachers, students, and peers. Through activities such as themed class meetings, collaborative subject competitions, and volunteer services, deeper communication and collaboration between teachers and students can be promoted. This approach encourages mutual learning and positive reinforcement among classmates. In such an environment, students can experience support and encouragement, helping to reduce the stress and pressure associated with competition. This fosters a healthy dynamic of striving for improvement without leading to harmful internal rivalries.

Finally, a supportive and equitable academic environment is crucial for nurturing students' innovative abilities. Schools should provide a relaxed atmosphere and adequate resources to support students in conducting innovative research and practical projects [16]. In evaluating academic achievements, it is important to uphold principles of fairness and rigorously prevent academic misconduct and unhealthy competition. This ensures that students' enthusiasm for innovation is safeguarded and encouraged. By cultivating a multidimensional and constructive competitive environment, schools can promote students' holistic development in a positive and supportive setting, while also driving the sustainable advancement of education quality.

Here is the English translation of the conclusion paragraph: [17].

4. Conclusion

"Involution" and "lying flat" are not merely individual deviations in choice among young people, but outcomes shaped by multiple structural contradictions, including a rigid educational evaluation system, uneven resource distribution, and the influence of utilitarian values. The former is reflected in inefficient investment driven by quantitative indicators, while the latter represents an adaptive response to the pressures and alienating effects of excessive competition. Addressing this dilemma requires not only that individuals move beyond self-consuming competition and return to the core purposes of effort and growth, but also that education systems undergo substantive institutional adjustment: balancing resource allocation, improving admission systems, optimizing management mechanisms, and building a diversified evaluation framework centered on comprehensive human development. Only by restoring education from a selection-oriented instrument to its educative function can the sense of alienation among young people be effectively alleviated and their concerns about fairness transformed into a

constructive impetus for social development, thereby fostering a new generation that is responsible, creative, and spiritually fulfilled.

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