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It's Not The End: Destigmatising Education-based Stigma in Singapore

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Abstract

Defined as the discrimination based on the educational status and the affiliation to the education institution, education-based stigmatisation is rooted in the social process of academic streaming within the education system where the individual is ascribed a stigma on the basis of their enrolment into the academic institution. In Singapore, the Institute of Technical Education has long been negatively perceived as being associated with less well-educated individuals and delinquency – this public perspective arises due to a combination of factors, such as the global socio-historical roots of vocational education and training, the valuation of the knowledge worker, academic streaming and sorting of students in Singapore, media reports of delinquents enrolled in the institution, as well as the pervasiveness of meritocratic ideology in Singapore's social structure. As a response to the stigma, top-down efforts initiated by the institution and education reforms aim to destigmatise the collective and the institution have resulted in media reports of positive deviances. These individuals accounts reported in the media are presented as "ITE success story" a narrative founded on the principles of meritocracy in the individual education-career trajectory. To understand the phenomenological experiences of those in the lower stratum of the education system, who are educationally stigmatised, the present study uses semi-structured and focus group discussions to explore the school-to-work transitions and the individual responses to the ideological beliefs and practices of meritocracy embedded within social structures, social interactions and the self. It found that in response to ascribed stigma, individuals engaged in various strategies in order to manage the self and their social identity, these included resisting and overcoming stigma through the reinterpretation of experiences. In addition, the study also found that the porous nature of the Singapore education system resulted in an increasingly differentiated pathway among participants where individuals were motivated to pursue their passion and thus, aligning the education-career trajectories to their identity. In the process of aligning their education-career trajectories, individuals exercised reflexivity in their social position, the identity capital available, and the opportunity structures, thus engaging in the navigation of the social structure.

Chapter 1: Putting Education-Based Stigma Into the Singapore Perspective

Principally, education is a mechanism for social mobility and the social reproduction of class (Hairon, 2021). In particular, the changing arena of education through education and social interventions has resulted in greater access to higher education, increased opportunities for further education, greater diversity of students in higher education, and advancement in pedagogical approaches and resources (Abdullah, 2021; Choi, 2021; Farías & Sevilla, 2015; Marginson, 2018). Education is also a mechanism of inequality (Brezis & Hellier, 2018), contributor of widening class divisions (Ho, 2012), legitimiser of one's socioeconomic status (Johannis et al., 2022), and a source of stigmatisation (Meisel et al., 2022). In addition, like many other post-modern societies, Singapore's socio-political and economic systems have adopted a view which values the decentralisation and state intervention in public goods, such as education and healthcare (Seethi, 2001). It is in this context that the life course becomes increasingly destandardised as macrosocial factors influence and are influenced by changing societal structures and social forces (Arnett et al., 2011). Meritocracy is viewed as the ideology that governs society and justifies the social position of individuals within the social system, in particular, educational meritocracy serves a more practical function that sorts and allocates individuals on the basis of one's merits or abilities and efforts into different stratums of the education system. As a result, academic streaming results in the sorting of students into different education stratum that mirrors the social class in Singapore and where pedagogical approaches and prestige is distributed unequally (Hairon, 2021) and where individuals sorted into the lower strata of the education system in Singapore are educationally stigmatised on the basis of meritocracy and the longstanding stigma of vocational education and training (VET) embedded in global history. The effects of stigmatisation particular manifest in the increasingly widened income gap across higher education graduates in Singapore where there was a S$1,600 difference between persons with a certificate from the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) and degree-holders (Ng et al., 2022). Furthermore, the report found that younger workers with lower education qualifications were doubly disadvantaged by their age and their earnings, their psychological or mental wellbeing, education qualification, as well as their job conditions in general, and were negatively affected by the coronavirus pandemic (Ng et al., 2022). A certificate from ITE was found to have made no difference in earnings when compared to persons whose education level was secondary and below; Moreover, participants without degrees were reported to experience poorer mental health, such as an increased likelihood of depression and were more likely to frequently be discouraged about their future (Ng et al., 2022). One explanation for the discrimination of ITE graduates is the valuation of intellectual jobs as compared to those which require technical skills and training (Tan, 2022). While another explanation arises from existing preconceptions associating ITE students with gang-related activities (Wu, 2022), thus resulting in moral outrage of delinquent behaviour which serves to reinforce the stereotype, and a desire to social distance from them (Tan et al., 2016).

Despite Singapore's reputation for having a top-class education system, the effects of academic sorting and its differentiated effects has been a contentious debate. From Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools to the well-established post-secondary institutions, Singapore's obsession with academic prestige is deeply embedded within a larger meritocratic narrative that is evident throughout society (Tan & Dimmock, 2014; Teo, 2019; Chua et al., 2019). Much of the literature accorded to the discourse on education in Singapore similarly discusses class habitus and elitist perception of meritocratic values which are socially reproduced in top-tiered education institutions (Goh, 2014; Koh, 2014; Lim & Apple, 2015; Harney, 2020). On the other hand, individuals in the lowest stratum

of the education system, namely those in ITE, seems to have little place in the discourse on education in Singapore – it is often discussed in relation to elite education institutions and the general academic streaming. It is no surprise that its long-standing stigma with its influence on individual's school-to-work transitions has also been under-discussed. With education deeply intertwined with social mobility and with Singapore's education system having a highly porous nature, individuals are able to work towards a higher social standing through upwards academic progression – in doing so, the capital and the field of the educationally-stigmatised changes, as with the transformation of class habitus of individuals who progress through the education system.

Unlike those at the top of the stratum in the education system, individuals who are located within the publicly perceived lowest strata are stigmatised on the basis of the educational meritocratic ideals and the global perception on vocational education and training. This combination of public perception of vocational education, media coverage on delinquency among students and the academic sorting nature within the education system, results in the negative association and stigmatisation based on the affiliation to the educational institution. In extending the definition of education-based stigmatisation posited by Meisel and colleagues to include both the discrimination based on the educational status as well as the affiliation to the institution, the study explores the influence of education-based stigmatisation in the transition and life trajectory of ITE graduates and its relation to the growing social phenomenon of destigmatisation among ITE graduates. An expanded definition of what constitutes education-based stigma recognises that the educational institution can be a source of stigma and not merely a passive contributor in its provision of the education. Expanding this definition also indirectly uncovers the hidden narratives embedded within the social process of education meritocracy and hidden meanings of academic progression by exploring the phenomenological experiences of stigmatised individuals who are understood to be in the lower strata of the higher education system, and those who struggle against the stigma identity they were ascribed with. Thus, providing a fuller picture of educational meritocracy.

From a Bourdieusian point of view, the process of academic streaming results in the separation and distinction of different fields within the education system, and socially reproduces class specific habitus for each defined field. The field is structured based on the distributing structure of capital which, according to Bourdieu, can be classified into three forms – economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2015). Thus, the unequal distribution of capital within the social structure serves to legitimise power or "entitlement" through the social processes incorporated within the education system. It is within this space of positions or the field and capital in which individuals act relative to the habitus (Bourdieu & Collier, 2020). However, what Bourdieu considers as capital omits the socio-psychological resources of individuals which motivates agentic actions and facilitates the habitus transformation within the field. Studies conducted by Côté on identity capital substantiates this by linking culture and identity in the socio-developmental process in the transition to young adulthood (Côté, 1997). In considering the increasing diversity and personalisation of the life course in the school-to-work trajectories, identity capital provides a perspective to study how individuals strategically managed their identity through the "developing, organising and executing of a portfolio of identity-based resources" in their transition to adulthood (Côté, 2016). It integrates the link between social structure and personality to understand how societal forces shape and impact agency and the self. Within the context of education, identity capital is embodied within the social, educational, cultural and economic resources that an individual can leverage on in their transitions through the education system. In the discussion on destigmatisation, identity capital takes a more active role in understanding the distribution of capital in the various fields of the education system,

and how the social process of destigmatisation influences individual identity in the decision to pursue further education or to engage in school-to-work transitions.

This study explores the school-to-work transition of 16 ITE graduates aged between 21 and 30 years. It aims to address the gap in research on how education-based stigmatised communities respond to the ideological beliefs and perception of those outside of their community (the out-group) and in their social networks, as well as to explore the phenomenological experiences of the ITE community in Singapore. Similar studies conducted found that individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds who make upwards progression in their academic careers experience a habitus transformation as the field of their class and capital changes (Chiang et al., 2020; Goh, 2014; Ingram, 2011; Lee, 2017; Lehmann, 2013). However, these studies are somewhat lacking in understanding what instigates the need for upward social mobility among stigmatised communities; and how the habitus transformation relates to meritocratic ideologies in neoliberal societies. As the present study finds that the process of destigmatising the institution and the collective is not a single causal relationship where a top-down approach is taken to changes public and personal perception, but a two-way causal process by which individuals within the collective respond to top-down destigmatisation initiatives through agentic actions in the life trajectory and social networks – consequentially reinforcing the meritocratic ideology within Singapore as they become in themselves models of perceived societal success. In doing so, the study utilises both semi-structured interviews as well as focus group discussions to understand the how stigmatised community rationalise and "make meaning" of their school-to-work transition in a meritocratic society like Singapore. Three questions of relevant importance arise within the present study:

First, how do educationally stigmatised communities negotiate and plan their life pathways, and what influences their decision to pursue further education? In asking this question, I inquire into what triggers the need to pursue the normative educational trajectory in Singapore by which progression to polytechnic is perceived as a given among ITE students; as well as the strategies used by the stigmatised collective to plan their school-to-work transitions in order to align their present education-career circumstances to their desired trajectories – here it is understood that these goals are part of the individuals' identity and thus are non-definitive. Hence, the notion of identity and identity capital accumulation in agentic actions is drawn into question as individuals become more aware of the field that they are in and the acquired capital necessary to meet their goal-oriented pathways in their careers. Second, how does the collective perceive the ascribed stigma in their education-career experiences and its impact in their social networks. This question also recognises the growing shift towards educational inclusivity and destigmatisation of the ITE institution and community. Through this question, I explore the influence of the stigma on the self and in the social networks of stigmatised collective to understand how societal changes in narratives influences self-perception and the out-group perception on these individuals. Thus, exploring social process of destigmatization on the self and the stigmatised collective's response to top-down destigmatisation efforts. Lastly, in exploring the aforementioned questions, I probe the question into how these experiences and relate to the larger narrative on meritocracy in Singapore to understand how the experiences of educationally stigmatised community are rationalised in the context of the larger society.

This study found that in an attempt to resist stigmatisation, individuals within the collective group redefine their ITE experiences, develop strategies to acquire more resources (sociological and psychological) and increase their opportunities to progress and succeed in the meritocratic game. In adapting to the transition from school-to-work, the set of dispositions that define the individuals'

habitus is transformed and the individual utilises the available resources to adapt to the new social environment. By personally embodying the "ITE success" story in themselves, individuals become advocates who attempt to destigmatise and motivate others in their social networks. This results in a social phenomenon in which the collective responds to top-down destigmatization – thereby reproducing the rhetoric and reinforcing the narrative on meritocracy.

Chapter 2: Vocational Training History and VET in Singapore

The stigma attached to ITE derives in part from the global history of vocational education and training (VET) in which it was traditionally perceived as an inferior alternative to formal education and was associated to workers in the lower social class and theorised as a class-based solution amongst capitalist to consolidate power within the corporate economies (Lyons et al., 1991), thus it was publicly understood as being a cost-effective solution to meet the technical skills and labour needs of the economy, as well as a de-legitimate education programme (Benavot, 1983; Hyslop-Margison, 1999).

From a socio-historical perspective, the growth in demand for vocational education reflected the characteristics of the global economy by which it contributed to the development of human capital necessary for the labour needs of the state and served to support and reinforce the dominant ideals and social structure of society (Benavot, 1983; Tanner and Tanner, 1975; Twining, 2000). The technological progression of the industrial revolution led to the shift in demands for various education programs to meet its manpower needs; higher education evolved to address these challenges and changing paradigms of the time (Abdullah, 2021; Billett, 2013; Hyslop-Margison, 1999). The onset of the Fourth Industrial Revolution has likewise brought about structural changes associated with the digitalisation and artificial intelligence by which it has disrupted every facet of life and society, and led to the valuation of knowledge workers who produce goods and services through the use of information thus resulting in technological unemployment (Hughes & Southern, 2019; Spöttl & Windelband, 2020). As a result, there is a differential valuation across careers. However, qualitative researchers, Jasanoff and Kim (2015) expound on this relationship between the 4IR and human capital development, through the use of vocational education and training, as being much more complex. Importantly, these complexities arise from contradictory tensions such as technical unemployment, the distribution of jobs associated with wealth, "a shift in favour of capital away from labour", as well as the growth of precarity (Dolphin, 2015; Goos et al., 2014; Lordon, 2014; Standing, 2016).

Today, the global scene of vocational education is viewed as obligatory for a country's education system, and an invaluable rite of passage for social mobility amongst the less privileged classes in society (Chiang et al., 2020; Siddiky & Uh, 2020; Suharno et al., 2020). It is centred around enabling skill acquisition and technical training to prepare one for the labour force, and the importance of collaboration between the institution and the industry is recognised by states (Fraumeni & Liu, 2021; ReliefWeb, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2017). Importantly, the support of the government and industries reveals the socio-political positions of vocational education and training within a state with which narratives are derived from in part – as in the case of Indonesia's history of vocational education development in which the lack of proper guidance, provision of knowledge about vocational education, financial support, involvement of industry, and the absence of several study programs in higher education (which are needful for its industry) resulted in the perception as a "second-choice education" (Suharno et al., 2020). This section explores vocational education in

Singapore and discusses the context and impact of educational inequality and the ideological narratives which contribute to the stigmatisation of the ITE community.

2.1 Vocational Education and Training in Singapore

With both high participation and completion rate, as well as a highly porous education system, students are streamed into various pathways as deemed appropriate for their abilities – it should be noted that although students are streamed according to their aptitudes, learning styles and abilities, the different pathways do not have a predetermined end but are often dependent on the academic performance of the individual. The highly porous nature of the education system in Singapore further allows students to decide when to enter and exit, and the pace of their education and career transitions. As seen in Fig. 1, the Singapore education system is divided into three segments over the life course: (1) six years of primary education, (2) four to five years of secondary education, and (3) post-secondary education. Students are enrolled into either a primary school or special education institution at age six; after which they progress into secondary education where they are streamed based on their Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) academic performance and sorted into various academic streams, such as the normal technical, normal academic, express as well as specialised education (MOE, 2023). What legitimises one's assigned stream within the education system is the ideology of meritocracy which is understood as reward or merit derived from one's ability and hard work (Teo, 2019) and is manifested through the use of sorting mechanisms that are embodied in the form of major exams, like the GCE O-Level and N-Level, A-level, and other alternative qualifications (as seen in Fig. 1 below). As a result, these sorting mechanisms serve to systematically rank and legitimise the assignment of one's socio-academic position within Singapore's education system. As such, the Singapore education system, particularly in secondary education, can be seen to mirror the social class structure with which critics highlight the range of contradictions embedded within the practice of meritocracy, as seen in Singapore's civil and political leadership where the upper ranks are filled mainly by government bonded scholarships in highly competitive education tracks (Lim, 2015; Tan, 2008). Ho argues that the discourse on elitism and meritocracy, and the unequal distribution or control of resources across various education curriculums has culminated in the social reproduction of class through the sorting and differentiation of citizenship (2015). This sorting of students entails socialising them into three prominent categories where: (1) ITE students, or the less academically inclined, are socialised into their role of supporting and maintaining existing social order, (2) Polytechnic students, or students in the mid-tier, are taught to replicated the middle-class by being "responsible and diligent" citizens, and (3) students in pre-university programmes, or the top-tier students, are socialised into future leadership roles (Ho, 2015). With its central role in the production and reproduction of dominant ideologies, the education system reinforces the belief of meritocracy among students to accept their social position or to strive to ascend the academic ladder (Koh, 2014; Lim, 2016). This sorting and reproduction of social class in education is seen in the annual intake in post-secondary education where in 2021, enrolment in junior colleges accounted for 18 percent, polytechnic amounted to 61 percent and ITE had 20 percent (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2023; Yong, 2017). In addition to major exams which act as a sorting mechanism, the financial capabilities and access to resources also serve to limit and determine who gets to pursue further studies. As reported by Ng (2021a) who stated that 46 percent of students who completed their NITEC course do not enrol immediately into a Higher NITEC (H.NITEC) course due to financial reasons. Apart from the financial limitations, it is worth noting that annually, the top 10 percent of

ITE graduates are guaranteed seats with others offered a conditional entry in the local polytechnics (MOE, 2023; Yang, 2017); whereas in 2019, 30 per cent of polytechnic graduates had enrolled in one of the six autonomous universities in Singapore (Davie, 2021). However, as an increasing number of individuals from non-working-class backgrounds enrol into VET, the academic sorting and social reproduction of citizenry behaviour remains an enigma as to how one's class habitus – notably their socio-economic background – responds to one's educational location.

In the arena of educational trajectories, the narrative of meritocracy is observed through preference for pathways that are geared towards a university degree (Byun & Park, 2017; Tan, 2014) – with the most preferred and conventional post-secondary pathway in Singapore is through the junior college (JC) to one of the six publicly funded universities or the autonomous universities (Hairon, 2021). Another preferred pathway identified was the vocation education and training institutes, like such as the polytechnic and ITE, to autonomous universities (Hairon, 2021; Lee & Kang, 2022). As seen in Fig. 1, Singapore's education system also encompasses a greater diversity of pathways which seeks to develop the human capital through lifelong learning and skill upgrading (Hairon, 2021; Lee et al., 2022).

Yet, despite Singapore's attempt to accommodate to the re-skilling and learning needs of its population, Talib and Fitzgerald argue that even the metaphor of diversity within the talent pool and in the creation of diverse education-career pathways provides a moral basis for inequality in the state's meritocratic education system (2015). This is translated through the valuation of different qualification types, namely the relationship between education attainment and ones salaries (Tan, 2018). With 81.7% of fresh graduates in universities receiving a mean salary of $3,600, 70.7% of polytechnic fresh graduates receiving $2,540, and 67.3% of ITE graduates receiving $2,050 (MOM, 2020). As a result of this differential treatment of qualification, students in the lower tiers of the academic tracks often strive to progress higher in their education career (Wu, 2022).

In a report on the wage, jobs, work conditions, and well-being among young workers, the NUS Social Science Research Centre found that low educated young workers are more likely to be doubly disadvantaged, particularly in their younger age, earnings, occupation opportunities, employment outcomes, the job conditions, job security as well as psychological well-being (Ng et al., 2022). Consequentially, negatively impacting the long-term job trajectories of these young workers.

For the purpose of this thesis, this paper will primarily focus on the impacts of educational meritocracy in academic streaming and its relation to VET in Singapore. The structure post-secondary VET, as seen in Fig. 1, consists of two main institutions: (1) the ITE, which offers both certificates and higher certificates in vocational training, and (2) the Polytechnic "which offer diploma level para-professional training, advanced and specialist diplomas" (Varaprasad, 2021).

Although Singapore's VET system is considered one or the most effective, and a gold standard among the VET systems that are school-based (Tucker, 2019), the structural nature of Singapore's education system results in a myriad of educational inequalities and class-related social phenomena – these include the reproduction of class habitus in relation to academic sorting, citizenry political engagement (Driskell, 2016; Ho, 2012; Koh, 2014; Lim & Apple, 2015). These social phenomena regarding the social reproduction of class habitus and academic streaming have been documented and heavily discussed in the arena of education in Singapore. What remains contested is the differential treatment of ITE students in Singapore, in particular the ascribed stigmatisation based on one's education background in relation to the school and the achieved status received upon progressing

through the education system. Given that the support of the government is relatively equal between the ITE and Polytechnic institutions – which is evident in the scale of investment whereby the cost per student in 2022 was allocated at S$19,836 for polytechnic students and S$19,215 for ITE students (MOF, 2022), and enrolment into ITE has increased – the prevalent public sentiment of ITE students and the ascribed and internalised stigmatisation seems irrational in comparison to that of other Asian countries where social stigma arises as an indirect consequence of a lack of government support.

Hitherto the discussion of ITE and it's position within Singapore's education system, it is vital to inquire on the role of relationship between the stigmatised community and the role of human capital development. And more importantly, the legitimisation of one's deservingness of the status achieved within the in-group– the in-group refers to those who have enrolled in ITE or have graduated ITE. Additionally, it would be important to consider the implications of one's ITE status within the individual's social network and the response to it – this is in consideration of one's social class and the habitus and inter-field interaction outside of the community and within the privacy of the family.

Given that Singapore's underlying ideology which governs the rationalisation of social stratification within society is associated to meritocracy – whether distorted in definition or not – the stigmatisation of the ITE community should be considered relative to its position within the education system as well as in relation to the media reports. Thereby highlighting the inconsistency between ideological belief and practical implications on the self and others – these include self-perception as well as perception and actions, whether non-verbal or verbal, taken towards or concerning the individual.

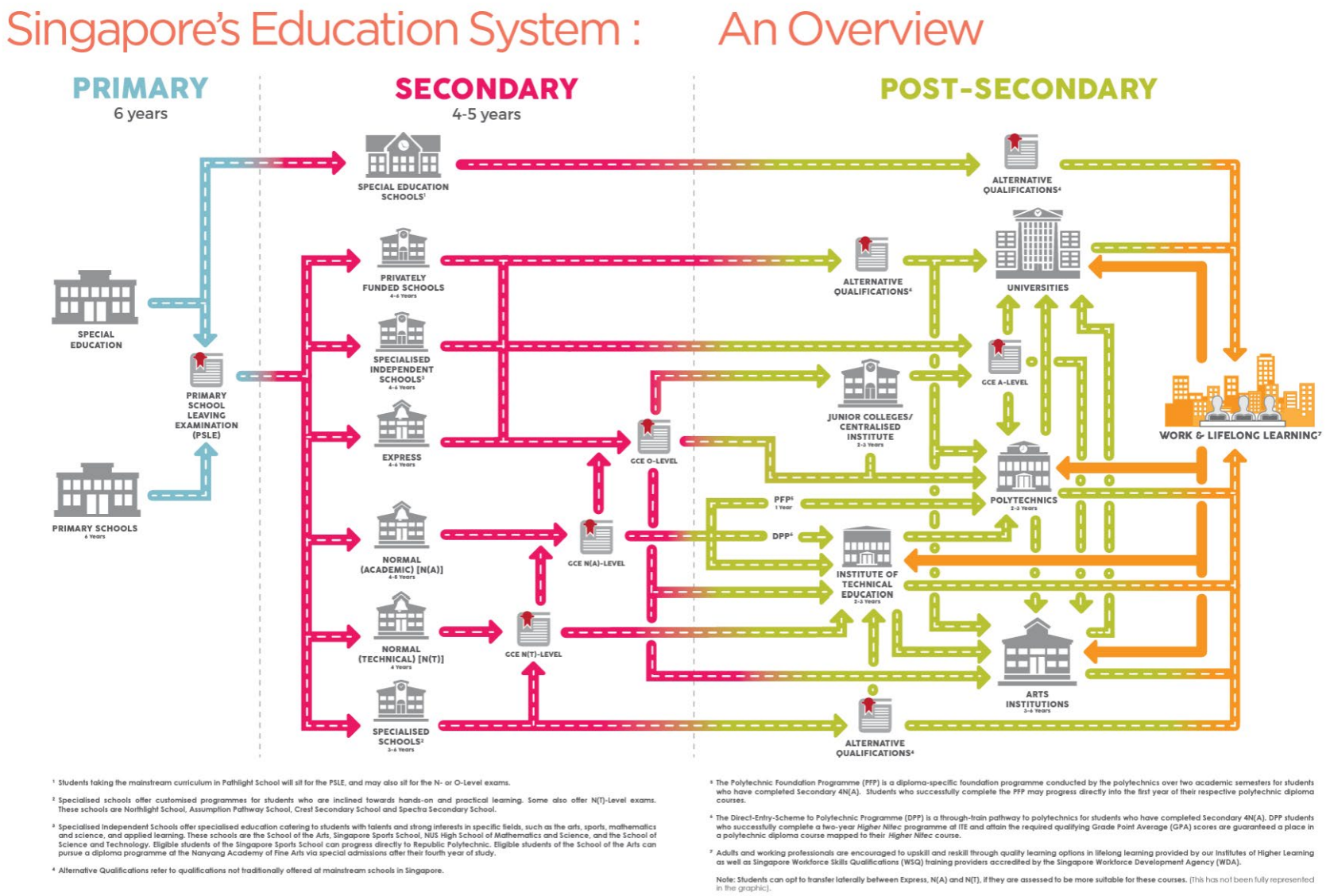

Fig. 1: Singapore's Education System: An Overview (MOE, 2023)

2.2 Background of ITE

The establishment of ITE in 1992 as a post-secondary education institution (Chan & Sum, 2017; Lee & Kang, 2022) was to focus on the lower end of the Vocational Technical Education (VTE) in which non-academically inclined students were equipped with 'hands-on' and practical skills technical occupations (Law, 2014). Although the ITE confers a National ITE Certificate (NITEC) which is awarded based on a competency-based system rather than the traditional education system.

Since its establishment as a post-secondary education institution in 1992, the ITE has undergone several transitions (Chong, 2014). Notably the association between streaming in secondary schools and vocational technical education offered by ITE resulted in the negative perception that students in "lesser" streams were unintelligent and assumed to have an unpromising future (Anwar, 2019). Furthermore, the government's rhetoric on meritocracy, unequal government spending on tertiary education, and elitist policies resulted in ITE's less than prestigious image during the mid- to late-1970s (Chong, 2014). This association of meritocratic values and elitist policies from Singapore's 'Second Industrial Revolution' led to parental hopes and the desire that their children would "make it" to university and be successful, resulted in a social stigma that arose because of education (Chong, 2014; Law, 2008; Meisel et al., 2022). To address this negative stereotype, ITE initiated a series of branding campaigns in 1998 in an attempt to change the public perception – notably increased media coverage of ITE as a positive deviance as well as its societal social and economic contribution (Chan & Sum, 2017; Devaraj, 2021; Lundahl, 2018). The aim of these branding campaigns was to enhance the image of ITE and technical education through the emphasis of key roles that ITE graduates played daily, and the skills acquired through the institution (Chan & Sum, 2017). Though the efficacy of such campaigns leaves much to be contended upon, the image of ITE students as a positive contributor in Singapore's economy has arguably improved. The position of ITE remains ambiguous and divisive – on one hand, it's improved image has resulted increased engagement in economic activities; while on the other hand, media reports of ITE students engaging in delinquent acts, such as stabbings, fights, bullying and trespassing, resulted in the confirmation of ITE students as 'troublemakers' among the public (Ang, 2021; Chia, 2021; Devaraj, 2021; Lam, 2019; Lay, 2018). The ambivalence of ITE's position within Singapore, particularly the influence of self-perception and perception of others within the ITE student's social networks, leaves much room for discussion as the culmination of positive and negative social factors inevitably results in polarized views of the ITE community with its association to delinquency or as an excellent example of the meritocratic ideology in Singapore.

Though public sentiments remain an obscure paradox, the general consensus across society proceeds from a meritocratic ideology in which one's social standing is justified by the individual's talent and efforts, such as education and career. This ideology stems directly in part from the political governance of the state whereby meritocracy was used to justify the market-based salaries of its ministers and it's elite civil servants (Wong, 2013). In addition, the meritocratic ideology found itself as a governing principle within the state's social structures and as a "rhetorical justification" of one's inherited privileges. Meritocracy in the locus of education, in particular, performed the role of justifying the social inequalities and stratification (Chua et al., 2022). Yet, despite the increasing awareness of the disillusionment of meritocratic ideals and acceptance of education attainment differences, the desire for upwards progression in the academic ladder persist – accounting for the change in the definition, the Ministry of Education (MOE) reported a decrease in full-time employment and an increase in part-time/temporary/freelance (PT/T/F) employment among the ITE students, as well as an approximately half of the polytechnic and ITE graduates in PT/T/F employment were pursuing or preparing to begin their further studies (MOE, 2022). This has resulted in a response to increase the number of seats available for intake into polytechnics and the local universities (MOE, 2023; Yang, 2017). It is yet to be understood how and why individual actions within the collective contradicts the existing narrative of larger acceptance of educational differences.

Therefore, it is necessary to implore into the ideology of meritocracy that governs society and facilitates the rationalisation one's social location within society as well as their deservingness.

2.3 ITE stigma

In light of the ideological background and the position of ITE within Singapore's education system, ITE is relatively stigmatized in comparison to other post-secondary VET. Stigma, as defined by Goffman (1986), is an attribute that can significantly discredit the individual:

> *An individual who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us. He possesses a stigma, an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated* (p. 5).

The stigma is thus inherited by the possessor, and it results in stereotypes and prejudices which manifests itself in numerous ways, such as stigma by association, self-stigma and structural stigmas (Bos et al., 2013; Frost, 2011; Lundberg et al., 2008; Parker & Aggleton, 2003). Education-based stigma is defined by Meisel and colleagues as stigma that is associated with one's education status (2022). I would like to extend the nexus of this definition by including stigmatisation by association to the institute, in particular, through enrolment or completion of the institutions programme. Education-based stigmatisation by this definition would thus encompass communities which are stigmatised for the education type, education level, and the establishment. This concept and identification of education-based stigmatisation has been widely studied and reported – most notably it has been reported in relation to vocational study, special education, or in community colleges (Choi, 2021; Farmer, 2013; Meisel et al., 2022).

According to Meisel and colleagues, who studied the stigmatisation associated with attending 4-year community colleges in America, it was found that the effects of education-related stigma are significantly associated with increased susceptibility to psychological disorders. Additionally, it is associated with the negative treatment and views stigmatised individuals receive in their social relationships, and the reduced access to resources based on the discrimination of being in a 4-year community college (Meisel et al., 2022). Education-based stigmatisation thus culminated as referring to the stigmatisation ascribe to an individual at lower levels of education (Meisel et. al., 2022).

Education-based stigmatisation was also found to be associated with different education type, notably in the study by Farías and Sevilla which found that Chilean students enrolled in the vocational education at the secondary school level (VESL) had lower rates of access and persistence than academic ones (2015). The study also found that, in comparison to students enrolled in academic education at the secondary level, VESL student also had a lower probability of being able to access funding for higher education and were more likely to enrol in evening classes. It was also reported that VESL students were more likely to enrol in a technical training centre or professional institutes (VETL) rather than at a university level – though it is also possible that VESL students transition into VETL could be seen as a logical or a natural path of progression in one's trajectory. VESL, in general, was reported to be perceived as being less academic due to a large percentage of hours dedicated towards work-oriented training (Farías and Sevilla, 2015).

One explanation for the education-based stigmatization arises from Solga's argument that at a macro-level, education expansion has caused an increased selection within the educational system, and this has resulted in a negative selection whereby less educated group within the working population is negatively selected, in terms of the social composition and their relative ability in comparison to groups that are higher educated (Solga, 2002). This group is thus seen as less attractive to employers who may seek to hire skilled individuals who are signalled by their education background. With

increasing education expansion and sorting process within the education system, Solga argues that employers increasingly trust the ranking and sorting process of educational institutions and assessments, and this leads to an exclusion of "less well-educated" (2002). This argument is closely related to the displacement argument but does not account for the qualitative differences and changes within the education structure, namely the function of the vocational education and training institutions, in comparison to higher education offered in universities. While it is true that education expansion has led to further development of education structure, it does not explain how and why stigmatisation of a community by association to an educational institute occurs. Education-based stigmatisation should be understood in relation to the social processes within society that contributes to the negative perception.

In the context of Singapore, education stigmatisation of ITE students and graduates primarily arises as a result of the historical roots and the perceived social determinants – arising from social behaviour and the ideological beliefs – results in a confluence of factors contributing to ITE's distinct negative disposition within public perception (Neo et al., 2023). According to the Ng and Choo (2020), Singapore's economic transformation in the 1960s and 1970s formed a new middle class who possessed financial resources to acquire positional goods – such as education which signalled one's newly acquired class status (Chua et al., 1999). Singapore's economic transformation also led to the transformation of the education system – which shifted from a universal system that focuses on rapidly educating whole population, to a system that was stratified and focused on sorting students into academic and technical streams (Ng & Choo, 2020; Chua et al., 1999). These academic and technical streams at the secondary school level introduced paths into the vocational and technical education. On the development of vocational and technical education in Singapore, Chong (2014) outlined that "vocational education suffered from social stigma in light of its less prestigious image… that the government's rhetoric on meritocracy and elitist policies exacerbated this social stigma as the middle class began to develop its own characteristics, tastes and values" (p. 647). Echoing similar sentiments in his biography, Law (2014) also acknowledged that a key challenge which ITE faced, despite its worldwide reputation and success, was the "college mania" which prejudiced vocation and technical education in Singapore.

Yet, despite this statement that the prejudice against ITE stems from it being VET does not hold when it takes into account that polytechnics also falls into this category within the education system in Singapore. Hitherto the discussion above, ITE's stigma thus arises in part due to its deep historical roots, the media reports of deviant behaviour within the community, as well as the position and valuation of academics embedded within dominant ideology and its social and economic structures. Education, specifically non-normative education, is thus negatively perceived to be undesirable due to its relation to the general education system (Neo et al., 2023). As Goffman states,

> *An attribute that stigmatises one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself* (Goffman, 1986, p. 3).

By Goffman's definition, this would mean that stigmatised communities possess an attribute that devalues the social identity in a particular context. The stigma is understood as a relationship between a stereotype and the attribute where the undesirable trait is linked to the trait. However, as Link and Phelan (2001) identifies, research has approached stigma from an individualistic standpoint. This results in the stigma being perceived as "something in the person" rather than an attribute that is attached to the individual – consequentially this term of "stigma" directs our attention from social exclusion to the individual; in comparison to terms like "discrimination" which focuses on the producer of social exclusion and rejection, and ultimately shifting the responsibility of the problem (Haghighat, 2001; Sayce, 1998; Tilcsik, 2020). In highlighting the misconception, Link and Phelan defines stigma as

> *In our conceptualization, stigma exists when the following interrelated components converge. In the first component, people distinguish and label human differences. In the second, dominant cultural beliefs link labelled persons to undesirable characteristics—to negative stereotypes. In the third, labelled persons are placed in distinct categories so as to accomplish some degree of separation of "us" from "them." In the fourth, labelled persons experience status loss and discrimination that lead to unequal outcomes. Finally, stigmatization is entirely contingent on access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labelled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination. Thus, we apply the term stigma when elements of labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows the components of stigma to unfold* (Link and Phelan, 2001, p. 367).

Link and Phelan's conceptualisation thus draws the attention from the individual and focuses on the cultural and ideological beliefs, the social processes and the power relations that occur within the society which gives rise to the stigma or the *mark*. Notably, the degree of the experience is dependent on the time and social context which the stigmatisation exists in (Bos et al., 2013; Chan & Sum, 2017).

2.4 Destigmatization

In recent years, there is an increased initiation to destigmatise through the reconstruction of the ITE community by focuses on its positive contributions to society (Chan & Sum, 2017). Despite public recognition of negative perception and increased initiation to destigmatise the community, there is limited literature on education-based stigma, particularly in its relation to destigmatization narratives and self-destigmatization efforts through life transitions.

Destigmatization defined by Clair, Daniel and Lamont (2016) is a social process where societal-level stigma is reduced over time due to the changes in cultural constructions of groups over time. Studies surrounding destigmatization explore how stigma is managed by the in-group and out group, as well as the efforts and avenues used to destigmatize – such as practitioner advocacy (Sanders, 2017), legal reform to decriminalise (Lithur, 2004; Sanders, 2017; Weitzer, 2017), social sharing of emotions and co-construction of empowerment within the stigmatised community (Matson-Barkat et al., 2022), media (including social media), expanding community awareness (Fletcher, 2019; Lithur, 2004), industry support, normalisation and the neutralisation of language (Haghighat, 2001; Matson-Barkat et al., 2022). Destigmatization studies often seek to redress the discrimination that stigmatized communities experience. Such is also the case in Singapore where the highly porous nature of the Singapore education as well as with the growing acceptance of educational differences, has resulted in legal and education reforms, increased partnerships with industries, media coverage of the institution and community, and an attempt to appeal to existing narratives (Kwek et al., 2020; ITE, 2021; MOE, 2018, 2023; Tan, 2009; Yang, 2016). Concomitantly, the ITE community's response to top-down efforts to destigmatize and the persistent prejudices held due to the stereotypes, cultural ideology and public perception (ITE, n.d.). Responses from the ITE community that were reported via the media publications and social media cooperatively echoed the individual's "ITE success story" against a backdrop of meritocratic ideology in society. Notably, public perceptions towards vocational education had shifted favourably (Chiu, 2019; Chua, 2022; Daud, 2018; Ng, 2021; Salim, 2020). In this regard, these success stories do not explicate on the individual's efforts to destigmatise themselves and thus presents a gap in the destigmatization process of education-based stigmatization whereby the individual is perceived to be a passive receiver of the top-down efforts to destigmatize the individual – receiving only the outcomes of the social processes in society and occasionally responding where necessary to support the rhetoric putforth by the media, and the Institute of

Technical Education. Additionally, it would be valuable to implore into the interaction between the individual agency of the stigmatised individual in a porous education system that enables one greater flexibility to achieve one's desired outcome – on the basis of one's ability and efforts, and in consideration of alternative pathways to self-defined goals and perceived success.

Chapter 3: Bourdieusian Perspectives and Identity Capital

3.1 Bourdieu's Habitus, Field and Capital

Bourdieu's theory on habitus, field and capital is insightful in the study on education progression, school-to-work transitions and the destigmatisation of education-based stigma amongst the ITE graduates. The academic sorting nature of the post-secondary education system takes its full-toll in the final years of secondary school in which individuals take their N- or O-Level examinations to determine their academic standing and post-secondary education pathway (MOE, 2023). It is within the education system where a different types of education institutions are hierarchized on the basis of academic grades and where fields are formed, relative to the social standing of the grades required to enter the institution – the requirement for admission into ITE being comparably lower as compared to that of other institutions. The education system functions similar to a field of fields (as coined by Bourdieu) where each distinct field are separated by the boundaries between different educational class. It is within this *field of fields* or inter-field, which Bourdieu describes as a terrain consisting of different fields each with its own agent (or representatives), that the fields interact, and its hierarchies ought to be managed. To illustrate this, Bourdieu uses the example of the 19th century salon:

> *One problem in these sub-spaces is the management of the hierarchies between the fields. Another place of the same kind would be the literary salon: even if it is not the only question raised by the salon, we might wonder how this hierarchy is managed within this rather superficial sub-space whose capital is linked to different fields. One hypothesis would be that the hostess responsible for the salon uses diplomatic strategies to manage the relations, knowing that she is dealing with people who are all leaders in their domain and whose sudden cohabitation in the same sub-space creates problems. One question to ask might be whether the salon is going to be constituted as a field of fields – that is, a terrain where the different fields will confront each other by the intermediary of their representatives…*
> (Bourdieu & Collier, 2020, p.221)

Paralleling this, the ITE community exist within an inter-related field of social groups in Singapore by which it is governed by the practices and ideological beliefs of meritocracy where it functions as the legitimacy of one's social position within the order of social hierarchies. Similar to Bourdieu's recognition of the division of labour and the social role of women in the 19th century salon, the Institute of Technical Education serves as a provider of vocational education and training to those who are not academically inclined and an opportunity for other socially outcasted groups – the latter group includes delinquents among others. On the basis of educational meritocracy, Singapore's post-secondary education system enables one to attain a higher education status through pursuing further studies in the education-career pathway. In doing so, ITE students who continue to polytechnic, after their ITE education, is understood to have transitioned out and crossed the boundaries that separate one field from another – the habitus is transformed as the field and the capital changes. In expounding on the mechanism which enable this transformative process, Bourdieu perceives that what legitimises the distinguishing of one's social position is the system of symbols which exist between classes – namely symbolic power, capital and violence (Swartz, 2020; Wright & Weininger, 2005). Swartz (2020) succinctly describes the symbolic system stating that:

> *His theory of symbolic power, violence, and capital stresses the active role that symbolic forms play as resources that reflect, constitute, maintain, and change social hierarchies. Symbolic power entails the capacity to impose symbolic meanings and forms (classifications and categories) as legitimate. Symbolic capital signals the recognized authority to exercise symbolic power. Symbolic power becomes violence (symbolic violence) when those meanings and forms are incorporated in both cognitive schemes and bodily expressions as taken-for-granted, natural, and just, rather than as arbitrary expressions of power. Symbolic power finds expression in the form of embodied dispositions – what Bourdieu calls the habitus – that generate a "practical sense" for organizing perceptions of and actions in the social world. The dispositions of habitus incorporate a sense of place in the stratified social order – an understanding of inclusion and exclusion in the various social hierarchies.* (pp. 320 – 321)

It is this symbolic power, or habitus, which determines the response of the individual – accounting for both the position within the social hierarchy and the resources that are available. According to Wacquant (2016), in Bourdieu's view, the habitus is conceptualised as a mediating construct which principally functions to revoke the duality between the agent and the field by capturing the socio-symbolic structures of society and internalising them within the individual, thus forming the dispositions which guides the responses to the individual's milieu. As noted above, among the different types of education institutions, ITE is undeniably ranked in the lowest strata of the post-secondary education system due to the grade distribution and the low number of requirements needed for admission into the institute – thus, individuals within this stratum are often found to be non-academically inclined and from the lower and lower-middle class (Wu, 2022). As Bourdieu states,

> *Since the habitus is a set of dispositions, or patterns of the perception, assimilation and acquisition of objective structures and objective repetition… we can understand that, when it functions like a little generator to invent or engender something, what it produces appears to have been produced on purpose in order to adapt to whatever it has adapted to - since it is in its very logic to adapt as far as possible to the structures within which it operates… The notion of the habitus defines a principle that generates thoughts, perceptions, actions and words. It seems to obey external promptings and thus to be inspired by a desire to adapt to intentions, whereas it does in fact mostly adapt spontaneously.* (Bourdieu & Collier, 2020, p.65)

In Distinction, Bourdieu develops this idea of habitus further as a form of expression by the agent within the social space and their position within the "objective space" (Bourdieu, 2015, p.165). This "space", according to Bourdieu, refers to the "space of positions that explains how the people who inhabit their positions act, all things being equal, and always depending on the relative autonomy of the habitus" (Bourdieu & Collier, 2020, p.220). The field is therefore structured based on the structure of the capital distributed – the capital understood as the economic, cultural (including educational) and social capital (Bourdieu, 2015; Bourdieu & Collier, 2020). Three dimensions which are fundamental to the construction of space included: "the volume of capital, composition of capital, and change in these two properties over time (manifested by past and potential trajectory of the social space)" (Bourdieu, 2015, p.108).

In constructing the social space of the ITE community within Singapore, we therefore see that with meritocratic ideology deeply ingrained in the practices and social structures of Singapore and where the education system is made porous, the social position of the ITE community is inconsistent and conflicting. On one hand, it is marked by the negative association with poor academic performance, greater susceptibility to delinquency and negative life outcomes (Law, 2014; Wu, 2022); while on the other hand, the porous nature of the education system, the increased educational reforms, and increased industry support results in a rhetoric which attempt to destigmatise the ITE community (Kwek et al., 2020; ITE, 2021; MOE, 2018, 2023; Tan, 2009; Yang, 2016). In situating the ITE

student amidst this complex system of social structures and social processes, the individual develops a habitus which is consistent with their social location within the higher education system, and socially reproduces and "carries" dispositions which defines it (Hall, 2022; Harvey, 2023; Ng & Choo, 2020). As a result, the individual is faced with an amalgamate of choices and social relations to which they have to negotiate and plan in order to smoothly transition into adulthood – whether consciously or subconsciously planned. Optimistically, Bourdieu would argue that the individuals would be able to adapt to the opportunities presented as a result of the schemas acquired:

> *Social agents placed in a given social situations will tend to adapt to their aspirations quite unconsciously to the possibilities objectively written into these conditions... One of the properties of the social fields would be precisely the structure of possibility - of 'objective potential' or objective probability, to use Weber's terminology - that it offers either to an average subject or to a particular subject able to specify in their particular case the value of these average probabilities. This relation between opportunity and expectation does not come out of the blue. It is constantly at play in the social experience of the agent… Social experience as the incorporated form of objective patterns is the product of that sort of permanent adaptation of the biological agent to the world whereby objective patterns become immanent rules for behaviour.* (Bourdieu & Collier, 2020, p.128)

Interestingly, Bourdieu points out that adaptation is not spontaneous and instead individuals leverage on their social experiences of objective patterns, such as the awareness of reforms within the post-secondary education system, to manage the perception of opportunity and expectations. This is pivotal in understanding both the destigmatisation efforts of positive deviances in the media as it rationalises their experiences within the education system. And where top-down destigmatization efforts attempt to change the narratives of the ITE community, the question on "who gets a say" and "what legitimizes the social position of the individual to do so" surfaces. In raising these questions, the nature of the field, and its relationship to the habitus probes into: (1) the social identity and the capital (or resources) of the individual, (2) the collective response based on the perceived social marker(s) which allow for the analysing of successfully inherited dispositions and the co-reproduction of those disposition (or the diffusion of those dispositions over time). Wacquant (2014) highlights the simultaneity relationship between the individual and the collective:

> *There is an individual habitus, the idiosyncratic product of a singular social trajectory and set of life experiences… that is nonetheless the combination of shared constituents… These individual experiences are selected and stamped by membership in collectives and attachment to institutions. On the side of collectives, we find the major principles of social vision and division, in particular those that anchor strategies of group-making… There is likewise a class habitus since all social agents are located in a hierarchical distribution of forms of capital rooted in or derived from the economic structure; this class habitus can be further declined by class fraction… habitus since each of these prevalent 'containers' of social action making claim to collective honour tends to produce joint ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, and common sets of expectations. And so on with other operative markers of social classification and stratification. On the side of institutions, we have bundles of durable dispositions specific to definite organizations… and specialized microcosms or fields… Settings that inculcate, cultivate, and reward distinct but transposable sets of categories, skills, and desires among their participants can be fruitfully analysed as sites of production and operation of habitus.* (p. 120)

Wacquant's statement highlights the complexity between the individual, the collective and the institution. Where the individual is understood to follow a singular social trajectory which embodies a combination of shared constituents that mark their membership in the collective and institution. This shared disposition and social experiences within the collective gives rise to the habitus associated with

the collective and are situated within the economic structure or the capital distribution. Similarly, the ITE student trajectory and life experiences departs from a similar experience where the education institution act as "sites of production and operation of habitus", and where the education system sets stringent requirements which act as barriers of entry – preventing only a minimal number of individuals from progressing to the next education class. As a result, individuals within the stigmatised field develop a set of habitus in relation to their field and the available capital present. Thus the habitus is a collection of transposable and durable dispositions (of the collective) inscribed on the individual, a dilemma arises in relation to the change in field of the individual, namely the school-to-work transition. In thinking about the social position, Bourdieu states:

> *Firstly, then: the field as a physical field or field of forces designates the field as a sort of theory of the state of the positions held by the agents, groups of agents or institutions in the field of forces. The social world, seen in these terms, is a space of potential forces, an order of coexistence in which each agent, singular or collective, is defined by their position within the space - that is, by all the properties written into the point in the space where they are located, properties that are inseparable from the global structure of the space. When we speak of a position, this does then constantly remind us that the only properties in this space are relational ones. In fact, it is impossible to define a position in any way other than in relation to the global space of the positions… One of the properties of a position is that you cannot be where you are and be somewhere else at the same time, which gives us another fundamental and axiomatic property, which follows from the fact of thinking of the space of a position as such: I cannot be where I am and somewhere else at the same time. I cannot 'put myself in your place . . .'* (Bourdieu & Collier, 2020, pp.213 – 214)

When this change in social position occurs and there is a transformation in the social space of the field, individuals are likely to undergo, what Baxter and Brtitton terms, the habitus dislocation – understood as the painful dislocation between the past and present habitus (or the old habitus and the habitus that is being developed, i.e. the new habitus) which carry connotations of inferiority and superiority, and which are ranked hierarchies (Baxter & Britton, 2001). In a longitudinal qualitative study conducted to study the successful working class university students in a "research-intensive" Canadian university, Lehmann (2013) found that, rather than a "painful dislocation", the participants discussed that throughout their enrolment, they experienced a gradual shift in their perceptions, as well as developing forms of middle-class cultural capital and having adjusted their political views – Lehmann reported that this was often discussed in relation "to a departure from their former lives". In addition, Lehmann also found that when discussing the maintaining of contact with their former high school peers and family, the participants perceived them negatively as being unmotivated, narrow-minded and having "wasted their lives", while perceiving themselves as having overcome their working-class struggles and "improved themselves" (Lehmann, 2013). Conflict between the participants and their parents or former friends resulted in the participants perceiving that the new knowledge attained carried more weight and "set them apart from their less educated family members and peers" (Lehmann, 2013). Lehmann's study on the habitus transformation identified the hidden injuries of class which arise from the struggle of the old and the new social position and habitus. Similar studies conducted on the disjunction of habitus supports this claim in varying degrees (Ingram, 2011; Morrice, 2013). The result of this struggle can be surmised as such:

> *As students move away from their working-class backgrounds, they do lose networks and forms of social capital. Although their working-class social capital may not be of immediate value to them in their goals to break into middle-class careers, they nonetheless have value in having given them ontological security.* (Lehmann, 2013, p. 12)

According to Sennett and Cobb (2023), the source of the hidden injuries stems from the mismatch of expectations and demands made between the present and the future self and others. Poignantly put, it

is the self-sacrifice made in their present for the future position that can be attained – this present sacrifice results in delayed gratification and future orientation of the self (Sennett & Cobb, 2023, pp. 125 - 126).

In returning to the question on "who gets a say" and "what legitimizes the social position of the individual to do so," we can expect that: (1) this strife to distinguish oneself from the negative stereotypes assumed by the masses in society is not necessarily a zero-sum game against the stigmatised collective, (2) in transitioning from school-to-work, one is thought to have successfully overcome the cause of their stigma (namely the institution) and have the potential to, in themselves, be successful through the attainment of, what Sennett and Cobb calls, 'badges of ability', and as a result, (3) formerly stigmatised individuals become advocates who attempt to destigmatise the institution by socially reproducing their accounts of success within their social network – these accounts are directed towards fitting the "ITE success story" narrative. Furthermore, the success of the accounts varies in relation to the social position of the individual within the collective and their adulthood transition. As Sennett and Cobb states:

> *The image is important because on the most intimately personal level it appears to people as a way to decide who can wear the badge. In these struggles for worth there are two classes, the many and the few; the selves of the many are in limbo, the selves of the few who have performed win respect. But the few need the many: individual exist only so long as a mass exists, a point of reference consisting of others who seem pretty much alike.* (Sennett & Cobb, 2023, p.67)

For the formerly stigmatised to be advocates or to be positive deviances, there needs to be deviances in the collective which act as a benchmark for comparison. While Sennett and Cobb put forth a compelling point on the relationship between the few and the many, they overemphasize the role of agentic action and the lessen the effect of the individual's resources (capital) in determining the social position within the field and in attaining more badges of ability or capital acquisition. Bourdieu highlights this relationship between capital and legitimisation of power by stating:

> *The structure of the distribution of capital is the structuring principle of a field… Capital is that kind of social energy that operates in a determined space and can be concentrated in the hands of a few. It will be distributed among people, it can be manipulated… it can be appropriated and guaranteed. The role of the law will be to guarantee the monopolistic appropriation of a kind of capital or a part of the capital at stake. The effects of what the Americans call 'certification', through the 'entitlement effect'30 exercised by an academic qualification, legal entitlement or property deed, are to guarantee appropriation of the social energy accumulated and effective in a given field. There is then a sort of reification: the title somehow puts the capital out of harm's way; it becomes untouchable, it belongs once and for all time to its owner.* (Bourdieu & Collier, 2020, pp.222 – 223)

Although Bourdieu notes that capital can be reified through social processes like certification and legal entitlement, his idea of capital is incomplete – as mentioned above, for Bourdieu, what constitutes as his definition of capital includes the economic, social and cultural (education) capital. In order for the accumulated capital to be of any use, the ego (or the self) has to strategically manage it – this is known as identity capital. Notwithstanding the assumption of unequal distribution of resources and the social position of the individual within the collective, the stigmatised identity of the individual can trigger or motivate interests and strategic management of resources (or capital) towards attaining self-defined ideas of success.

3.2 Identity Capital

While Bourdieu's theory on habitus, capital and the field are useful in understanding the education progression and the transition from school-to-work, as well as the education system, it is insufficient in explaining the purposeful and deliberate actions of individuals in their education-career pathway plans and trajectory. Capital is painted as a passive contributor in the equation, thus one plausible approach is that the destandardisation of the life course and the cultural de-structuring in late modernity has led to a widespread anomie whereby the deconstructed norms and ideologies, as well as the de-structured social markers of adulthood transitions and the divide between institutions of school and work, result in greater individualisation – where social actions are guided by and aligned with the individual identity (Côté, 2016).

In the discussion on identity, two pertinent lines of research emerges in the study of identity and social identities in relation to externalities, namely identity economics and identity capital. Where identity economics focuses on the motivation of identity as a driver of decision-making and in quantifying the utilitarian and economical returns of identity produced behaviour (Akerlof & Kranton, 2011), identity capital explores the relationship and interaction between the agentic actions and social structures in the transition to adulthood– the socio-developmental identity of individuals.

Developed by James Côté (2016), the identity capital theory is a perspective for the studying of how individuals develop and strategically manage various elements of their lives. According to Côté, strategic management "involves developing, organizing, and executing a 'portfolio' of identity-based resources that are suitable to various institutional contexts… and more generally, are adaptable to a function adulthood in a given society" (2016). Recognising the different levels of interactions between culture and identity (namely social structure, social interactions and individual personality), identity capital develops a social structure-personality perspective and suggest the taxonomy of the social identity, personal identity and the ego identity (Côté,1996). With the basic premise that the traditional normative structures in society have diminished, identity capital assumes that there is an individualisation of identities and trajectories in response to the risk and opportunities present (Côté et al., 2015).

Côté postulates that in late-modern societies, the social identity is managed reflexively and strategically to fit oneself within a group of "strangers," thus impression management is necessary in the formation of the social identity (1996). In addition, identity capital is helpful in studying the habitus in the transition of one field to another, which entails the adaptation and acquisition of class specific aspects that one transitions to:

> *Those who "change" social classes must learn many things as adults that are taken for granted by those whose primary socialization prepared them for the class-specific aspects their adult lives. Those who begin new lives in different social contexts are acutely aware of many things that are taken for granted by those who have only known that one way of living. People who have experienced a type of "contradictory class-location" (e.g., Wright, 1982), or a bi-cultural dislocation (e.g., Hughey, 2008) should particularly identify with the ICM on a personal level.* (Côté, 2016, p.7)

Similarly, in the theorising of code theory, Bernstein (1981) also recognises that the different classes have different symbolic codes (e.g., the language, attitudes, habits, dispositions, etc). It is these codes which serve as a regulative principle and a positioning device in the relations of classes (Bernstein, 1981). In transitioning from school-to-work or in transitioning out of institution-based stigma, formerly stigmatised individuals, or ITE graduates, have to adapt to the new environment and social positions within the organisation – to successfully integrate and transition from school-to-work and young adulthood, the individual needs to learn the codes associated to the field or their social position,

thus replacing and integrating the old with the new habitus and involving the strategic identity management.

The facet of strategic management of identities emphasises the need for young adults to have a repertoire of resources (personal, social and economic) to manage and facilitate various transitions over the life course which may vary in different contexts. Without it these resources, the young adult is at a greater risk of being socially and economically excluded (Côté, 2016). Côté (1996, 2002, 2005, 2016) states that these resources that identity capital refers to include the sociological resources (tangible) and psychological resources (intangible), and the incorporation of both for the strategic management of identity and choices in the young adulthood transition.

With the transition to young adulthood becoming increasingly prolonged (Arnett, 2000; Benson & Elder, 2011; Côté, 1996; Schwartz et al., 2005), the cultural de-structuring in the late-modern society has resulted in a greater perceived instability among young adults (Luyckx et al., 2011). Côté (2005) list several of the cultural de-structuring manifestations which may interfere with the individualization process in the young adulthood transition, these include the wage exploitation of youths who are in their 20s, the movement of capital from local to global markets (which may undermine the available economic resources within the state for the investment in local community services and education), and the marketing strategies designed to orient themselves and 'brand' youths to certain products. In studying the perceived instability in emerging adulthood, Luyckx and colleagues found that identity capital took on a protective role in the risks and opportunities presented in the school-to-work transition (Luyckx et al., 2011). They further noted:

> *When individuals did possess the necessary personal resources, they were able to cope in an agentic manner with the challenges they are confronted with in their late teens and twenties. On the other hand, the unstructured nature of emerging adulthood appeared to be rather overwhelming for those individuals who were unable to capitalize on the opportunities provided due to a lack of personal resources* (Luyckx et al., 2011, p. 143).

In addition, these resources can be invested for the acquisition of more identity capital. This strategic exchange process is referred to as the identity investment (Côté, 2002). The basic requirement for identity capital acquisition to occur is that it involves utilizing one's existing resources through the different strategies, consciously or not (Côté, 1996; Luyckx et al., 2011). However, Luyckx, De Witte and Goossens (2011) found that individuals who were more reflexive about their social position, the available resources, and labour market situation, were more likely to feel a sense of achieving adulthood. Consequently, the identity capital acquisition "appeared to function as an internal resource enabling individuals to navigate their way into and through the modern and unstable labour market" (Luyckx et al., 2011).

Apart from the sociological and psychological resources generated from the identity investment, it is important to note that stigmatise individuals do not exist in isolation and the self is embedded within a network of social relations and that the identity also serves as an intersection between the social institutions and the motivations and behaviours of the individual within these institutions (Walker & Lynn, 2013) by which the rationalisation of social processes and actions proceeds from as well as the legitimisation of one's position within the social network. Walker and Lynn's study on the social networks and identity salience, found that the strength and proportion of ties to role-based others, together with the quantity of time that was spent in a given role within the social networks was corelated to the salience of the collective identities (2013). Similarly, in a study on the impact of social network on the individual's attitude strength, Visser and Mirabile found that the individuals who were embedded within a social network of individuals who shared similar views were more resistant to changes as compared to individuals from more heterogeneous networks, thus concluding that the social network composition could affect the strength of individual's attitudes (2004). Aside from the strength of the network, social networks have also been found to influence self-management

through the sharing of knowledge and experiences, the provision of access and mediation of resources, as well as the reflexivity in one's interpersonal relationships (Vassilev et al., 2014). Research on the effect of social network on the recovery attitudes of individuals with serious mental illness and the internal stigma experienced found that there was a positive relationship between the individual's social network size and the perceived strength, and the internalised stigma and recovery attitudes (Cullen et al., 2017).

Aside from the positive effects that social networks could have on the individual (Sibitz et al., 2011), research has also found that network ties could be perceived as a double-edged sword whereby the embeddedness of the individual produced both benefits as well as social obligations and responsibilities by which the individuals associated with the organisation and their social relationships (Kim, 2015).

While social relationships maybe a source of capital, studies conducted on the social networks of stigmatised individuals, like that of Warr (2005) and Boudewyns and colleagues (2015) also found that discomfort generated from the interaction between the stigmatised identity and the 'out-group' resulted in the use of a variety of strategies to manage their identities, these include avoiding the stigmatized topics as well as selectively disclosing personal information or disguising the discrediting information. Thus, while social relations and the embeddedness within a social network can serve as constructive forces in identity, it is also plausible that stigmatised individuals may feel a sense of discomfort and engage in identity management strategies.

Chapter 4: Research Method

The broad aim of the research was to explore the experiences of the educationally stigmatised communities in Singapore, and their response to the ideological beliefs and practices of meritocracy which are embedded within the education system, and within the social networks and the public and self-perception. Literature review conducted on the history of VET and VET in Singapore suggest that negative perceptions towards technical skills and vocational training are rooted in socio-historical context in which VET was developed to meet the labour demands of the industrial revolution by training masses of workers in the lower social classes to be proficient with technical skills, and thus was considered inferior and de-legitimate education in comparison to formal education. In Singapore, VET is integral to the economic and social development of the state and is provided for at the post-secondary level through the polytechnic and the ITE. The Bourdieusian perspective guides the literature and analyses the relation between the social position of ITE and the development of the collective's habitus in relation to the field and capital commonly associated to the education class. Furthermore, the theory provides a framework for the rationalisation of meritocracy in academic streaming and the education-career trajectory among the educationally stigmatised. Where Bourdieu is limited in providing a frame for understanding the motivation behind the education-career trajectory and purposeful planning of the education transitions, Côté's theory on identical capital further guides the study in providing a perspective to understand the individualisation of the education and career pathway, as well as the strategic management and organisation of resources for the acquisition of more identity capital. Using this theoretical frame to guide the research questions and study the responses, the I conducted the study in two parts: (1) semi-structured interviews, and (2) focus group discussions. The study was conducted over the duration of four months in 2022 with graduates from the Institute of Technical Education (College East, College West and College Central) to explore how the community rationalises and makes meaning of their experiences in meritocratic Singapore, as well as how they negotiate and plan their life trajectories.

Young adult VET students who were from ITE were selected to understand the phenomenological experiences due to the longstanding stereotype held within Singapore and the establishment's social

position within the education system. As individuals are embedded within a social network of persons outside and within the community, the individual's perception of self and others is influenced by other social characteristics associated with their class. In situating this, the study explores the experiences of the stigmatised ascribed social position embedded within education and familial class background, and how it is interpreted, rationalised, and used to negotiate their trajectories amidst the backdrop of the meritocratic ideology and destigmatisation narratives in Singapore.

In the first phase of the study, I interviewed participants to understand the education-career pathways that were taken which led to their enrolment into the institution and the rationale behind the decisions made upon their graduation to their present life stage. The purpose of this was to gain a detailed account of the individual experiences and to explore the diverse pathways taken in response to the circumstances presented at each juncture of the life transition (which includes the challenges, the available resources, the social location and the set of dispositions or the habitus which guide and govern the individual's decision-making process), the interactions within the social networks, as well as the individual's perceived future trajectories. In addition, the semi-structured interviews also provided the study an opportunity to delve into the complexities that individuals encountered in their decision-making and the narratives entwined within these perspectives.

Themes identified in the semi-structured interviews were used as points of discussion in the second phase which consisted of a small Focus Group Discussion (FGD) between two to three participants who were organised by their course discipline. Through the extraction of nuances embedded within the interviews and discussion of these nuances and rationalisation process within the focus group, a fuller understanding is drawn through the exploration of stigmatised beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, and practices which take place during young adulthood transitions, as well as the meanings embedded in in-group nuances. Apart from providing an opportunity to collect detailed data on the social processes, FGDs also enabled the study to capture the diverse view and experiences, as well as the refining and clarification of explanation for group processes, such as the influence of ideology on the education-career trajectory of educationally stigmatised persons. Importantly, it provides a context to understand the perception and behaviours with which individuals respond to community-level interventions. Thus, by incorporating both an inductive and deductive approach in the study through the use of semi-structured interviews and FGDs, the study seeks to avoid a reductionist explanation in exploring how the educationally stigmatised community responds to the narratives and the ever-changing social structure of the state.

In using a Bourdieusian perspective, the study attempts to provide a wholistic framework of the interactions between the capital, habitus and field as seen in Fig. 2. In recognising the limitation of Bourdieu's work which pertains to what constitutes as capital, the study incorporates Côté's work on identity capital to study the socio-psychological assets that enables one to leverage on strategically managing and developing capital or resources (both terms are used interchangeably) for decision-making. Where the identity reinforces the ego-executive abilities (such as identity management) which is vital to identity maintenance (Côté, 2016). The following section outlines the method in which the research was conducted., the operational definition, the procedures and recruitment of participants.

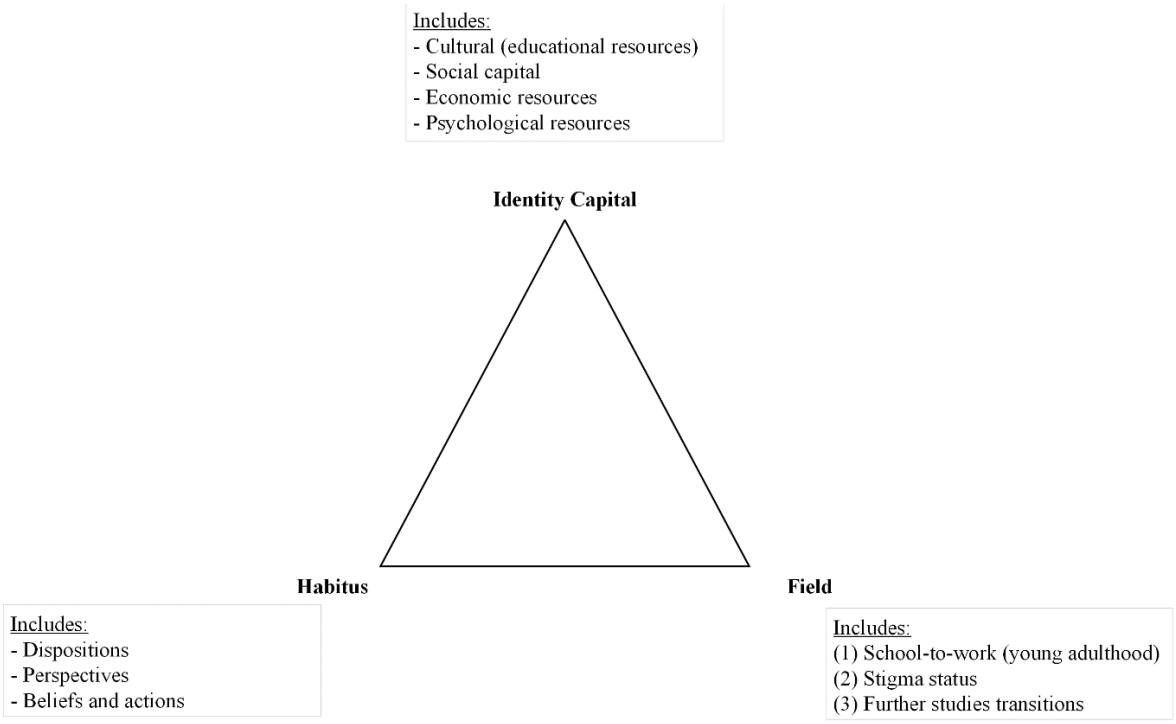

Fig. 2: Bourdieu's habitus, identity capital and field

4.1 Research Ethics

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Nanyang Technological University (approval number IRB-2022-667). As the study involved the participation of human subjects, particularly individuals who are considered vulnerable subjects, ethical approval was necessary to ensure the safety and well-being of the participants. Additionally, to ensure that participants were not coerced and aware of the details of the research conducted, all participants were required to provide a written informed consent prior to the enrolment into the study as per the approved protocol by the local ethics committee.

4.2 Recruitment

Participants for both the qualitative interviews and the focus group discussions were recruited through mutual connections, namely through ITE friends and former lecturers in ITE and polytechnics, who acted as recruiters. Participants were recruited through social media (specifically Facebook and Instagram), direct messages, LinkedIn or through class group chats. Recruitment was also conducted through the Institute of Technical Education's alumni network – these include email and social media (Facebook and Instagram). Recruitment posters which advertised the study were disseminated through online status and story posts as well as through online messaging platforms (such as WhatsApp and Telegram). Participants who responded were screened by the recruiters (consisting of mutual affiliations like ITE friends and ITE and polytechnic lecturers) and I to determine the suitability. These criteria included: (1) participants must be aged 21 to 30 years, as of 2022; and (2) participant must be a graduate of the Institute of Technical Education.

In addition, participants who were recruited via snowballing and word-of-mouth by participants from the first phase and middlemen recruiters for the second phase of the study (or FGDs) were required to complete a Microsoft Office Form. The use of these forms enabled the collection of personal information which included participants' familial background, housing type, ethnicity, education qualifications, occupation, as well as their ITE courses. Using these responses, participants were

grouped based on similar disciplines, these included hospitality and services, business services, as well as nursing and paramedic. In grouping the participants based on their discipline, the study notes that the admission requirements for post-secondary enrolment into a NITEC or Higher NITEC varies between courses – which serve to further segment and assign a social position within the ITE education. Grouping based on participant's disciplines also allowed for the study to explore the course-specific habitus, response to stigma and destigmatisation, and the education-career trajectory. It expects to find varying perceptions and responses as individuals are socialised differently depending on their course and the nature of their profession which they receive training for.

As seen in Table 1, the participants recruited for each study included 9 participants for semi-structured interviews and 7 for FGDs. This constitutes a total of 15 participants recruited for both the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions.

Table 1: Recruitment of participants for semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions.

Research Method	Participants
Semi-structured Interview	9
Focus Group Discussion	7

4.3 Qualitative interviews

In the first phase of the study, 9 participants who were aged 21 to 30 years (or born in the years 2001 to 1992) were recruited for the qualitative interviews. A distribution of the participant demographics is seen in table 2 which list the age range of those aged 21-25 and 26-30, the sex, mode which interview was conducted, the highest education and the occupation of the participants. The interviews were conducted physically or virtually through the Zoom (an online virtual meeting platform).

The location of the face-to-face interviews were conducted at the venue of their choice, these included cafes and open spaces in hospitals and universities. Virtual interviews were also conducted via the online video conferencing platform, known as Zoom. In comparison to interviews conducted physically, virtual interviews provided participants who responded to the recruitment to meet despite their personal circumstances which prevented or inhibited the ability to meet face-to-face, these included respondents who were pursuing a bachelor's degree outside of the state or participants had not completed their stipulated quarantine order but had recovered from COVID-19, as per government protocols (Government of Singapore, 2022). Each of these modes of interview produced varied sets of advantages and disadvantages. In comparison to interviews conducted virtually, physical interviews provided an opportunity for rapport building with the participants prior to the session, it also enabled participants to meet at venues or environments which they were familiar and comfortable in. On the other hand, where there was a lack of time for rapport building prior to the interview, virtual interviews provided a clear recording of respondents facial expression and audio recording, and enabled participants from overseas or who were quarantined due to the nature of their job to participate in the study. A possible theoretical implication for interviews conducted online with participants who were pursuing further studies includes the alteration of the habitus in relation to the change in the geographical location and the immediate social network which they are embedded in – this would influence the rationalisation of their social experiences and social actions.

Lasting approximately between 45 minutes to 1 hour, the semi-structured interview was conducted with a series of open-ended questions intended to elicit a conversation and address a range of topics about education and career trajectories, social networks, transition to adulthood, and personalised opinions of perceived success and definition of adulthood. This enabled the study to situate each participant's account and position within the social system, in doing so, it sought to understand the circumstances and considerations for individual decision-making and agentic actions at various points in their trajectory.

Table 2: Distribution of participants for qualitative interviews

	Distribution
Age range	
21 – 25	4
26 – 30	5
Sex	
Female	3
Male	6
Ethnicity	
Chinese	8
Indian	1
Mode of Interview	
In-person	6
Virtual interviews (Zoom)	3
Highest Education	
Nitec	1
Diploma	4
Bachelor's degree	4
Occupation	
Student	3
Full-time	4
Part-time	1
Freelance – Part-time	1

4.4 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Similarly, FGDs were conducted face-to-face and virtually via Zoom for a duration of between 1 hour to 1 hour and 30 minutes. A total of 7 participants (see table 3 for the participant demographics) were recruited and grouped into groups of two or three – according to popular and general areas of study that the participants pursued in ITE, namely nursing and paramedic (2 participants), business services (2 participants), and hospitality and service operations (3 participants). The small size of the focus group provided participants with a sense of commonality which stemmed from the shared course background and experience in ITE, and to provide a platform . The discipline specific groups also meant that participants were not restricted by large differences and were free to engage in course-specific habitus, such as the use jargons associated to the disciplines, education-career ethics and the ideology that engages in the identity and behaviour of peers for education-career trajectories.

A series of open-ended questions were used to elicit responses within the group and questions asked focused specifically on the relationship between society, the ITE student and the education-based stigma. Statements and responses made by participants were then further explored to understand the nature of the relationship in greater detail.

Table 3: Distribution of participants for Focus Group Discussions

	Distribution
Age range	
21 – 25	0
26 – 30	7
Sex	
Female	4
Male	3
Ethnicity	
Chinese	4

Malay	3
Mode of Interview	
In-person	5
Virtual interviews (Zoom)	2
Highest Education	
Polytechnic diploma	4
WSQ diploma	1
Higher Nitec (H.Nitec)	1
Bachelor's degree	1
Occupation	
Full-time	5
Part-time employment and part-time student	2

4.5 Data Analysis

In both interviews and FGDs, discussions were either video or audio recorded using Zoom or via the phone's video and audio recording function. Recordings were first transcribed via Transkriptor, an online audio-video transcription software, and later reviewed and clean.

Where Transkriptor was unable to transcribe the audio recording (due to the colloquial incorporation of several languages), the data that was collected were transcribed verbatim and coded. As participants were more likely to use casual register, the study took into account the use of Singlish as a creole language and other pidgin languages, such as Mandarin and Malay – a translation of the term was stated where necessary. In addition, I leveraged on my position as a graduate of the Institute of Technical Education and reviewed the jargons and phrases, and translated them into English for data analysis. The transcribed data was then coded on Dedoose (a qualitative research software) – it primarily utilised the analytic coding process which "involves a dialogue between the interview findings and the range of theories purporting to explain them." (Gerson & Damaske, 2021, p.150). The inductive and iterative approach was also used to analyse the data repeatedly until the themes and codes were found to be exhaustive. Additionally, pathway models of interviewees were also conceptualised from the semi-structured interview and mapped out to understand the trajectories and transitions accumulated from post-secondary school to the date the interview was conducted, this provided a context of the participants when reviewing the study's findings.

In both the semi-structured interviews and FGDs, participants identified the impact of stigmatisation and destigmatization of ITE, deviation from conventional education-career pathway, as well as the conscious strategizing of transitions. Specifically in the semi-structured interviews, participants noted the relationship between perception of ITE students and its influence on agentic actions in the strategizing of future trajectories. In the FGDs, participants identified the effects of unconventional education-career pathways and its effects on transitions to adulthood. The FGDs also highlighted the dissonance in narratives and public perception, as well as the effects of positive deviances in the media on self-perception.

Chapter 5: ITE stigma

5.1 Stigma On The Self: "It's The End"

In this study, almost all of the participants spontaneously mentioned the description of the stigma associated with the education institution. These included being from a "not so well-to-do family", "not as academically inclined", as well as the association to being society's "hopeless" "troublemaker". In addition, the acronym of ITE being phrased as "It's The End" similarly arose in the interviews. To understand what gave rise to the phrase, focus group discussions revealed that negative perceptions of ITE and reports of delinquency were prominent in the late 2010s coincided with the shift in key developments in Singapore's education system, particularly the education

streaming system (Davie, 2019; Driskell, 2016). As noted in a discussion between Syafiqah, a 27-year-old registered nurse who pursued a diploma in nursing at Nanyang Polytechnic, and Sue Li, a 28-year-old full-time assistant teacher in early childcare who is pursuing an advanced certificate in early childhood programme, the response to the stigma associated with the education institution results in specific strategies to avoid or rationalise the possibility of being assigned a stigma during ones education-career pathway:

Syafiqah *I think that from what I heard in my family before, [when I was] in secondary school, like "don't go ITE. Don't go ITE. Don't go ITE. Like ITE is a bad place, like for bad students. You will go haywire" and that kind of stuff. My friend even she doesn't want to go, so they stay back in secondary school, or they go to an art school – which is expensive lah so… I think now is much better lah. I didn't- when asked like… how long was it ah? 7, 8, 9… like 9 years ago when we graduate, I think that. I feel like, in a way… like my family didn't… I think kind of look down on me because I went to ITE? I don't know, I feel like I was being looked down lah. When… When you know, when we go out and wear our ITE nursing uniform and stuff. Yeah… but now I think the perception is much better 'cause a lot of ITE graduates become very successful.*

Sue Li *No difference lah. Like to me. like what Syafiqah say, parents always think that ITE is for very lousy place that kind of thing but then to me, I always tell my- my cousin all that, if they were to go ITE, "is the same, it's just that you take a longer route instead of like you straight away go poly and then you go out to work but then is that you just take a longer route to like. It just like one ITE there so it's not much of a difference.*

In the above interaction between participants, Syafiqah's statement above succinctly captured the averse reaction of friends in response to possibly entering ITE to which they chose instead to either retain and retake their secondary school qualification exam or to pursue alternatives in private education. Whether such drastic measures to avoid being ascribed a status associated with ITE seemingly depends on the perception of significant others on the self, such as family, and the impact it has on one's education and career pathway – of which both participants rationalised their experiences positively through the identification of "ITE graduates become very successful" and the "longer route" to progress to perceived normalcy through the polytechnic pathway. In rationalising ITE as an academic institute which provides a detour to polytechnic, it assumes absolutes, such as that one is poised to unconditionally enter polytechnic or to achieve societal recognition and success, and a perceived embodiment of the self as an ideal type with the necessary capital to do so.

In addition, during this focus group, both Syafiqah and Sue Li stated that they both each had a relative who had enrolled prior to them and how it affected them by lessening the impact and influenced them to pursue their career and education despite the stigma attached. Interestingly, this focus group disclosed how they encouraged others within their social network of family and friends to not be afraid to pursue a post-secondary education at the institution and often sharing their positive experiences from a personal perspective. In imploring further into the relationship between familial perception of the stigma and the stigmatised self, the presence of an ITE graduate within one's network of social relationships influences more than the negative opinions that significant others within the family hold, individuals take on an advocate role which serves to dilute the longstanding negative sentiments held within their social network. This is evident in Sue Li's statement above where she encourages her cousin and others to normalising viewing ITE as an academic pathway detour to pursue their aspirations.

Despite the recognition of a transformed image, the above interaction also captures the changing narratives and the ripples of influence from top-down destigmatization efforts on the self and collective. As evident in Syafiqah's recount, her statement highlights the effect of time and social context on the negative perspective and treatment experienced as a result of the stigma. Similarly. Tricia's recount (as seen below) of the stigma dates to the late 2010s in which the stigma was attributed to students who were classified as being unserious or who did not perform well in their

course of study. The barometer for what constitutes as being a good student as compared to the bad student is the ideological performativity.

> *It used to be back… maybe after my secondary school? During that year…During those two years before the 2020s, ITE was actually perceived as like where students who don't like to study or they like to play a lot – like they get bad results right? They were actually perceived to go to ITE, which is as what everyone used to say, 'It's The End.*

The prevalence of the statement among the collective who were studied concisely captures societal sentiments of the institution and it's community. With the gravity of this negative perception evident in its influence over the decision to enter the institution, as well as the social networks. It seemingly appears that graduates who have successfully subscribed and evidently proved themselves to have overcome the negative stereotype responds to top-down destigmatization by being advocates and models of the ITE success story in their own social spheres, as evident in the manner which the graduates in this study have expressed.

5.2 Resistance Against Stigma – "It's Not The End"

While the statement "It's The End" was prevalent in both interviews and FGDs, the statement also gave rise to the statement "It's Not The End" – highlighting the community's individual response to the negative societal perceptions. This statement encapsulated the participants perception of ITE as a turning point as well as an opportunity for a second chance. This view of the institution playing the role as a provider of second chances was also apparent in all of the FGDs and in 7 of the interviews. The perception of ITE as a provider of second chance was consequentially linked to the view that enrolment into ITE was perceived to be abnormal as it meant taking the "longer route". In the focus group, Sue Li and Syafiqah discussed the implications of the ITE stigma within their social networks and their attempts to destigmatise the institution of being an inferior school due to its perceived unequal standing among other post-secondary education. Both Sue Li and Syafiqah, brings to point, the generational differences in opinions by resisting and redefining them in their interactions within her social network:

Moderator *What do you think the general opinions or thoughts about ITE are in society?*

Syafiqah *I think now is much better lah. When asked like… how long was it ah… 7, 8, 9… like 9 years ago when we graduate, I think that. I- I feel like in a way like my family didn't… I think kind of look down on me because I went to ITE? I don't know, I feel like I was being looked down lah. When… when, you know, when we go out and wear our nursing uniform and stuff. Yeah, I mean, but now I think the perception is much better. It cost a lot of ITE graduates become very successful. Like, like in my secondary school last time, you know, you looked down at the Normal Tech. But my, like, majority of the Normal Tech in my school last time end up being very successful. Yeah, even if they went to ITE is just that. It's a longer route, I agree. But then I think the experience we get is very, very good. Yeah, it makes us much better students when we enter Poly.*

Sue Li *Uh like what Syafiqah said lor... I think now is like better for different… like for our era, the parents will think that it's really like not for a-… like not, not a route for us to go through lah because to them is like why you want to have extra, like go for extra road to. Like when you can work hard to go for Poly straight away. Yeah. So, like for currently, like parents like the people now is like thinking, like I think they're thinking like, I just as soon as the children they learn something, they just like that. Then just let them choose their own... own route by themself.*

Syafiqah *I think, I think. One thing I always tell my parents, or the current parents is that even if your child is slow or what, right. I think they have a lot of potential to be successful*

> *in the future in whatever they do lah. That's my strong belief lah. Like yeah because like if my cousin family they tell me they didn't pass 'it's OK, it's fine. You. I mean- I mean you get low grades like it's fine. It's fine like because one day you will find what you want to do in life.' I don't know. Maybe nowadays parents are too hard on their kids. I'm not sure, but I did very clean primary school and like secondary school I did good halfway. But I didn't do that bad. Yeah. So, I'm not sure.*

A point of interest in the above discussion is the resistance against the negative sentiments by diverting and counterbalancing them against other pathways – as put forth by both Sue Li and Syafiqah, who highlight how younger cohorts mindlessly pursue conventional pathways due to the normative expectations held by their parents or society. And unlike individuals who pursue the perceived conventional routes in polytechnics or junior colleges, all participants frequently made comparisons between their academic-career pathways with those of other pathways. Participants like Bernice, who have had the opportunity to pursue further studies through the polytechnic and universities, were less likely to make such comparisons.

Additionally, as seen in the focus group discussion above: To resist these negative stereotypes related to the institution, it is evident that the redefinition entails separating the negative image of association to youth delinquency and lack of ability to return to what is perceived to be the normative trajectory of others in the cohort. The entry into ITE as a direct post-secondary institution following the completion of secondary school level education is perceived as an abnormality in one's trajectory At the intimate level the interaction between the sociological facets and the agent results in, what Sennett and Cobb terms, the injured dignity which refers to the feelings of inadequacy and ambivalence that arises from the incongruity that between the normative values and expectations and one's social position which differs in comparison (Sennett & Cobb, 2023). As Sennett and Cobbs asserts that the uses of injured dignity cast a formulation within the social sphere by which "manifold acts of personal restoration added one to another… become transformed into a force that keeps the wounding society powerful" (Sennett & Cobb, 2023, p.172). The perception that enrolment into ITE as being abnormal relates to Singapore's wider education system by which one is rewarded based on merit. When taken into context of the ITE student, who is allotted a position in the lower academic tier, the individual is expected to 'fight' for a chance to pursue success and return to perceived normalcy which is understood to be middle-class by nature. As Leon poignantly highlights:

> *I mean my elder do say that ITE is the end lah, but to my perspective, it's not the end. It's actually the beginning of giving another person another chance… Actually, ITE you can just, if you study hard enough, you can progress to poly, and you can go back to normal. Like the normal student, the NA (acronym for Normal Academic) student route that they pursue. So, it's actually depend on the student itself, whether they want to go and fight for his opportunity*

To "fight" is not just to attempt to return to normalcy, it is the process of attempting to overcome the present structural ordeals which act as boundaries between social class. To "fight" and successfully overcome is to be rewarded a badge of ability that restores the perceived indignity and legitimises the new social position. As Sennett and Cobb states:

> *Class society takes away from all the people within it the feeling of secure dignity in the eyes of others and of themselves. It does so in two ways: first, by the images it projects of why people belong to high or low classes – class presented as the ultimate outcome of personal ability; second, by the definition the society makes of the actions to be taken by people of any class to validate their dignity -legitimisations of self which do not, cannot work and so reinforce the original anxiety. The result of this is…. The psychological motivation instilled by a class society is to heal a doubt about the self rather than create more power over things and other persons in the outer world* (Sennett & Cobb, 2023, pp. 170 – 171).

By choosing to "fight" for the opportunity to pursue further studies after ITE, students experience varying degrees of having entered young adulthood. Participants who continued with a diploma after

ITE and entered the workforce were reported to relate adulthood to social obligations to their parental families and having more financial freedom as compared to individuals who chose to pursue both diploma and a bachelor's degree immediately after completing their ITE education. While diploma-holders stated that they identified as being closer to their definition of adulthood, they also reported feeling a sense of instability due to the tension of trying to balance financial contributions to their parents and their own personal obligations and interests. Individuals who were pursuing a degree and individuals who did not continue their studies after post-secondary education at ITE (i.e., the course enrolled in upon completing secondary school) also felt a tension when asked to identify what young adulthood meant and whether they felt closer to the definition or further from it – often times they stated that they considered themselves to be an adult in a biological and psychological sense, and less of social in nature. Degree-holders, who were currently employed full-time, identified as being closer to their definition, their parent's definition and their friends' definition of being an adult – these include psychological and biological factors, parental obligations, higher income, financial instability, as well as the ability to pursue their interest. The varying levels of attempts to return to perceived normalcy by societal standards, would result in varying degrees of the delayed entry into young adulthood.

5.3 Overcoming Stigma

What is interesting is that although most participants were enthusiastic about sharing their experiences and their views of the ITE stigma, majority of the respondents also expressed feeling a sense of dejection during their enrolment as a student in the institution. In William's case, although he willingly chose to pursue post-secondary education in ITE, he admitted that the stigma experienced resulted in a mutual understanding, determination and common goal among his peers to "get out of this place".

> *"my friends bonded the most, I think, this is a hard pill to swallow, because of the stigma that… back then, because of the stigma that ITE students have, I think all of us had this common goal that we wanted to study hard and get out of this place, and, you know, 'wipe the slate clean'."*

William's recount demonstrates how intense negative feelings arising from perception of negative stereotypes resulted in triggering an intrinsic personal motivation to excel and succeed in making progress in their field and social location, as well as in developing group solidarity. In addition, the statement "wipe the slate clean" describes the intensity of the disdain for one's present predicament at the time, specifically it is the reflexivity of one's social standing within society and the internalisation of values which results in the intense negative emotions and the desire to escape one's own present reality (physically and psychologically). It is this desire which triggers the intrinsic motivation to, as Leon avidly describes, "fight" for their opportunity to progress further in their education and career trajectories. In another sense, the internalisation and reflexivity in one's circumstance brings about a distinctive psychological asset embedded within the identity of one's association to the institution.

Despite many respondents expressing the desire to "wipe the slate clean", it is also intriguing that in completing their post-secondary education in ITE, individual's perspective and response shifted from the desire to do well and forget this period of their life, to one in which they have experienced success by completing their education at the establishment. In Sennett and Cobb's perspective, the injured dignity of the stigmatised is restored. In the present study the "injured dignity" entails failing, on the basis of meritocracy present in social structure and ideological beliefs, to meet the personal and social expectation to enter into the normative education pathway as presumed by society and significant others; as well as the affiliation to the stigmatised community by the social status ascribed and granted by the education system. Against Sennett and Cobb's argument of an "injured dignity" being restored through attaining badges of ability, the present study finds that this "injured dignity" is not restored, but rather, at an intimate level, the personal experiences and interaction as part of the stigmatised

community together with the shame associated with bearing the mark as an ITE student is translated into a part of one's identity where the past is justified.

In returning to the discussion on "wiping the slate clean": The need to "wipe the slate clean" is particularly prominent among the participants who chose to further their studies in a diploma course at a publicly funded polytechnic institution. In William's case, he recounts of how he and his friends had "bonded" over their experiences and shared goal to "study hard and get out of" the education institution. In utilising these words, William expresses such strong sentiments in a manner which befits his desire to leave the institution. However, what is notably interesting was also the constructive force which compelled William to share his personal experiences in hopes of destigmatising the institution – this is evident in his recount that he had written an article for a faith-based website and expressed the need to share personal experiences and perception of the institution as a steppingstone for the non-academically inclined. This narrative of ITE as a steppingstone is repeated in almost all participants' accounts of their transition from school-to-work or in further studies, but particularly amongst individuals who performed well in their diploma and further studies. The idea that ITE is a steppingstone also lies in tandem with the idea of educational meritocracy in which the individual, who in graduating or completing their education at ITE, has overcome the ordeal of the negative labels attached to ITE by society as they leverage on the opportunity to return to the perceived normalcy (i.e., normative pathway) and restore the injured dignity by acquiring more badges of ability through identity capital investment that is oriented towards what they understand to be the personal and societal definition of success, such as upwards social mobility and prestige. Thus, this acquisition results in the further developing the dispositions notable to the "successful ITE student", its portrayal as an icon of meritocratic success, and its increasing prominence in the public space where they are lauded for having overcome the ordeals which society perceives to be associated with ITE's namesake. Importantly, it is the alignment of ideologies with these individuals which sets them apart from the doubly stigmatised individuals who are engaged in delinquency and who are "not academically inclined" – as understood by many of the participants who, in their interviews, often repeatedly mentioned and differentiated themselves from these individuals.

In pursuing the desire to overcome the stigma, which was ascribed upon enrolment into the institution, participants rationalised the need to achieve their individual goals and to pursue success through intentional effort where "working hard" was viewed as a prerequisite to making progress and being successful. Consequently, the hardworking successful individuals socially reproduce the habitus among their social networks within the in-group and respond to top-down destigmatization efforts by embodying in themselves the "ITE success story" in their social interactions with others. In doing so, not only is the dignity restored but applauded as in the case of William and Syafiqah who recounted their experiences of young adulthood after ITE.

Chapter 6: Differentiated Pathways

A resounding finding from both interviews and FGDs found that ITE graduates reported a differentiated education-career pathway as compared to the conventional pathways traversed by the general population of young adults in their cohort. While the conventional pathway in Singapore consists of progression from ITE to Polytechnic to University, or various combinations of tertiary education (Hairon, 2021); participant's accounts noted trajectories which differed from the conventional route. These trajectories that differed included the transition into private institutions, usage of alternative vocational programmes, such as the Work Skill Qualification (WSQ) programme offered at different qualification levels, as well as the enrolment into an overseas university.

6.1 Transitions and the Self

For most youths in Singapore who pursue post-secondary education (typically aged between 17 to 18 years old), entry into the institution marks the beginning of the transition to young adulthood where it

is described as a period of profound change and instability – this period within the life course is also known as young adulthood or, as Arnett names, emerging adulthood. For the purpose of this study, the terms young adulthood and emerging adulthood will be used interchangeably as Côté highlights several empirical inconsistencies with the model put forth by Arnett which are valid, and where the term emerging adulthood is at best a conceptual understanding of the age period which one enters young adulthood (Arnett et al., 2011; Côté, 2014). The emerging adulthood, as argued by Arnett, is identified as a distinct period of time between adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett et al., 2011; Arnett, 2014). It is characterised as the period of identity explorations, the feeling of being "in-between," and instability (Furlong, 2016). Importantly, with cultural shifts and development, the destandardisation of the life course has brought about a range of social processes – such as detraditionalization, development of a "risk society", and individualisation – that has impacted the transition to adulthood (Arnett et al., 2011). As a result, the increasingly individualisation of the life course has led to more heterogeneous life pathways in many countries (Alexander et al., 2014; Arnett et al., 2011; Benson & Elder, 2011).

In studying young adulthood, Hochberg and Konner found that emerging adulthood is as much a biological process as a sociological one in which the areas associated with the neocortex (namely the frontal lobes) continues to extend during maturation in the mid-20s and is incomplete even long after puberty and the physiological growth of the body (2020). Thereby accounting for the frequency of behavioural disturbances, risk-taking behaviour, impulsivity and the psychological instability that emerging adults experience. Although this finding significantly sheds light on the individual's physiological and psychological maturation into young adulthood, it discounts the influence of sociological forces to which agentic actions interact with and the relationship between cultural context and identity formation. And with stigma linked to the self, it draws an inquiry into the social identity of stigmatised individuals and management of the identity during life transitions, namely school-to-work transitions.

A growing body of studies on school-to-work transitions have increasingly recognised the significance it has on the successful transition to adulthood (Alexander et al., 2014; Arnett et al., 2011; Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Côté, 1996, 1997; Fang & Saks, 2022). The school-to-work transition defines the phase in which an individual leaves education and starts employment (Ng & Feldman, 2007). The success of the school-to-work transition in young adulthood is pivotal in setting patterns of life transitions (such as career changes) and the ability to cope with these changes – in particular, the success of the school-to-work transition influences individual's self-efficacy in decision-making and coping skills, stability of vocation choices, and the adaptation to new roles, workplace norms and work environment (Blokker et al., 2023; Ng & Feldman, 2007).

Bynner and Parsons longitudinal study, which analysed the 1970 British Birth Cohort Study surveyed at age 21, on young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) found that the added difficulties of the NEET status posed added difficulties in relation to the building of adult identity capital (2002). The extent of the damaging effects was reported to have extended to the psychological domain – on top of the poor labour market experience, material disadvantages (such as housing). In a study by Alexander, Entwisle and Olson (2014), research conducted based on the study of the effective transition based on the achieving of adulthood markers (which include first full-time job, marriage and cohabitation, independent living from parents, and becoming a parent) found that the number of transitions completed at aged 22 was 2.2 points whereas at age 28, the average was 3.2 points. An inquiry by Alexander, Entwisle and Olson (2014) into the markers that defined each age group found that at age 22, young persons were more likely to acquire their first full-time job (86.5%), and to live without their parents (46.8%); and at age 28, these adulthood markers were more prominent with acquisition of first full-time job (97.1%), marry and cohabitation (78.2%) and living without one's parents (75.8%). Arnett similarly argued that the concept of recentering during the emerging adulthood stage is both a developmental process as well as a process of interaction between culture and normative age development of those aged 18 to 29 (Arnett et al., 2011).

In addition, research on identity formation and school-to-work transition alludes to the impact of individual social characteristics in determining how smooth the transition into young adulthood would

be and the relationship between identity and social inequalities (Alexander et al., 2014; Fang & Saks, 2022). Akerlof and Kranton expounds on the influence of these social characteristics by stating that "…identity gives us a new window on inequality. Norms can call for behavior that leads to underperformance and unemployment. Boundaries of race, ethnicity, and class also limit who people can be. Because identity is fundamental to behavior, such limits may be the most important determinant of economic position and well-being" (Akerlof & Kranton, 2011, p.14). The limits and boundaries of the attributes present in one's social identity is widely reported – from race, social class as well as social stigmas (Akerlof & Kranton, 2011; Alexander et al., 2014; Copenhaver et al., 2007; Lee, 2017; Pinel et al., 2005). In a study by Coppenhaver and colleagues on formerly incarcerated inmates in higher education, it was found that the stigmatisation of this population was inevitable and the choice to disclose one's stigma was linked to how visibility of the stigma would impact self-perception – this resulted in individuals selectively revealing the stigma and internally struggling to decide whether to disclose their felon status during their job search for fear of social exclusion (Copenhaver et al., 2007). In another study, Lee (2017) who studied the faculty members from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds found that because academic departments were perceived as "white-collar spaces" faculty members minimised their low-SES experiences and concerns "in favour of a normative presentation of middle-class status and experiences". Furthermore, Lee also reported that faculty members often had to make decisions about whether, how and to whom they reveal their backgrounds to – in addition, feelings of tensions and worry surrounding the discrepancy between their own class background and that of their colleagues were frequently described (2017). What is apparent in both studies are the fields which they exist in and the social-psychological response to being embedded in it through the social reproduction of normative narratives present in the field and identity management of the agent. The identity formation of the self is inevitably tied to the field and capital in which it exists within.

6.2 Shift in Trajectories

Findings revealed the agentic actions of participants in response to the gap between their goals and present circumstance which are circumscribed by the complexity of the social and material world presented to the individuals. These goals include career entry and career progression in fields unrelated to the technical skills attained in their Nitec or Higher Nitec (H.Ntec) course. To achieve their goals, participants made calculative efforts towards strategizing their education-career pathway in a future-oriented manner in order to align closer to their present aspirations. These included searching for alternative qualification certificate to validify their work-skill proficiency or through progression in Singapore's education system, such as through public or private institutions. For Josaiah, a 22-year-old freelance camp instructor and part-time first-aid instructor, the shift in trajectory from graduating with a Nitec in Digital, Audio-Video Production to his current career was due to his initial inability to pursue his interest of fitness training management as his 'N' level grades did not qualify him for the course. This resulted in his decision to frivolously choose a course which mildly piqued his interest. Perhaps by no coincidence, Josaiah is the youngest of two brothers who pursued careers in marketing and media and was influenced socially to pursue a similar path. To bridge the gap between his passion for outdoor activities and the available resources, Josaiah stated:

> *"For now, why I'm doing freelance as a camp instructor is 'cause I'm trying to gain experience. Then after that, I'm trying to go back into studying next year. Which is ITE Work-Study diploma. So, what I need to do [now] is to actually get more experience from outside so that's what I'm trying to do."*

From the statement made above by Josaiah, it is evident that in order to pursue his passion as a career in the future, he was conscious of the mismatched between his initial course specialisation in ITE and his aspirations. This awareness was also layered by his understanding of how his actions in his present social position influenced the potential opportunities and choices made available in future circumstances. As evident in his emphasis that it was his "work history" which played a heavier role in contributing to his perceived future success of pursuing the further education in WSQ certificate in outdoor sports. It is evident that he strategically manages the available resources (particularly his

military vocation in the Singapore army as a combat medic, as well as his present social position within the outdoor industry) and invested them for the purpose of identity capital acquisition and future entry that would legitimise and enable him to reach his goal. His use of the words "for now" reflected his anticipation in biding his time as he accumulated the capital necessary to bridge the gap between present predicament and aspirations. "For now" indicates a sense of placid hope embedded within the process which lies in dormancy until the opportunity to realign to his next step is present. This opportunity encompasses the appearance of a *choice* made available when the sufficient capital or resources, converges with time.

Furthermore, in the shift in trajectories, it is also evident that these tangible resources also contributed to the strengthening of his ego-identity, internal locus of control and cognitive reasoning and critical thinking abilities, and developed the disposition that is hallmark of the field of the industry that he is embedded in.

Similarly, Leon, a 27 year old H.Nitec graduate who later pursued a WSQ diploma in pastry and baking at a private institute, Singapore Hotel Association Training and Education Centre (SHATEC), and is now the service manager at a pizza restaurant outlet, shared that the shift in trajectory from his initial course of study in ITE was due to his passion and circumstances of the time – apart from the limited number of seats in polytechnics allocated to ITE students in relevant courses, his grades did not qualify him to further his studies in a state-owned polytechnic which was presumed to be the common pathway of ITE graduates. He states that:

> *"I don't study poly. So, I study SHATEC. So, I don't know all the poly side, yeah, but compared to the kind of varieties of the courses that ITE has… ok, ITE does have pastry and baking course. But SHATEC is better. So, it's actually more on what type of skill you [are] trying to achieve through the course, and goals that you're trying to gain from the course".*

Interestingly, the inability to meet expectations to pursue a normative education-career pathway resulted in redefining of experiences. It is this redefining process which rationalised and mediated the shift in trajectories. It is also worth noting that the "expectation" refers those which are both personal and social in nature – where the individual's embeddedness within the social network influences and informs them of normative expectations, thus personal expectation are social expectations as well. As seen in Leon's statement above where having fallen short of his expectations to enter through the polytechnic pathway, he redefines his perspective in a neutral manner and relegates his resources towards alternatives that provides him an opportunity to align his present predicament to his refined aspirations.

Like Josaiah's response to the gap between his passion and past circumstance which was circumscribed by the complexity of the social and material world presented, individuals attempted to make conscious efforts to strategically plan their education-career pathway in a future-oriented manner towards their interest and passions which were closely linked to their identity. These included searching for alternative qualification certificate to validify their work-skill proficiency or through progression in Singapore's education system, such as through public or private institutions. And although it is indeterminable whether the shift in trajectories is a result of their personal dispositions, social environment or both, all respondents saw a need to pursue a certificate qualification in the area of interest – even if it meant being certified for jobs that individuals perceived to not require a certificate to perform otherwise.

6.3 Certificates as a Necessity

Although it may come as no surprise that participants stated the need to acquire certification for the industry that they are working in, it was interesting to note that despite the cynicism of progression for further studies, participants recognised the significance of the certificate in Singapore. However, unlike the mainstream students' valuation of certificates and accolades, the importance of its acquisition is especially important to ITE graduates due to the highly competitive nature of within the sphere of work in Singapore, and the limited opportunities available to invest in the personal

resources for more identity capital. Participants thus value acquiring certificates even when it may not be required of them – such as in the case of 28-year-old registered nurse, Tricia, who progressed from a Nitec in nursing and H.Nitec in paramedic and emergency medicine to a diploma in Nanyang Polytechnic, stated that despite her qualifications, experiences and the readiness of her employers to promote her as a senior staff nurse, she stated that:

> *It was more of a… um… personal influence. Because the thing is right… um… uh… in SGH, itself, you can be a senior staff nurse after four years of working experience. But to me, right… I didn't feel like I… even though I got promoted halfway through my degree… um… I didn't feel like with just a diploma cert… I didn't feel like I actually earned the title. Yeah so, I just wanted to further my studied so that I can do better in… like mainly performing care for my patient to understand more about it-… more about the conditions also.*

What is interesting to note in Tricia's recount of her experiences was her the tension between the normative belief that her work experiences qualified her for a promotion, and her own perception of deservedness for promotion. On one hand, the internalisation of meritocratic ideals about the necessity for education and work merits resulted in an understanding of her social position within the field. Yet on the other hand, it is also this internalisation of ideology and awareness of her social position within the field which creates an understanding of normative practices and rationale for differences in academic qualifications – despite the increasingly widespread belief in the equity between nurses with diploma and work experience, and nurses who begin work with a degree. The internalisation of one's social position relative to their qualifications of what is perceived to be the norm results in this desire and attempt to bridge the gap by pursuing a bachelor's degree part-time at a private university. Taken in another way, Tricia has "earned" her position by merit according to society's ideology which she has internalised. The act of *earning* her position, according to the *rules* set by society through the meritocratic belief, results in the reification of resources she acquires, such as her title, economic and social capital, as well the returns she receives from successfully managing her identity capital.

This sentiment towards qualifications was also shared by Haziq, a 26-year-old special education (SPED) teacher who completed his diploma in health management and Promotion and has been teaching physical education at a special needs school. In the discussion, he emphasized the importance of having a degree qualification in Singapore, and the tension he felt in his desire to pursue university education and his inability to do so in his present circumstances. However, unlike Tricia, his disgruntlement at the pay gap between a diploma holder and a degree holder was made apparent in his multiple verbal emphasis and scorn for the university and its degree holders. In the focus group discussion, he admittedly states:

> *Qualification is very important in Singapore *taps table heavily*. Yeah. In Singapore. okay. The difference between a degree holder and a diploma holder is like $400 roughly around there. That's all the difference. For my one ah ah. So that's what I realised you know… for me is like, if I can get a degree now, I'll get a degree now, okay. Because I feel right, the minimum to live in Singapore is a degree. For one… to have a better- easier access to promotions, you know, a degree is very important okay. And yeah, I guess no matter how good you are, it's harder to get promoted based on qualifications. And when you get accepted for a job offer, it's "oh do you have a degree?" *clicks tongue* you know.*

In Haziq's statement, a comparison is made against the working conditions and salary of degree holders, and the unequal chances that an ITE-diploma holder has against a system which perceives that the normative pathway to be the polytechnic-university route, and the social structures and opportunities built around them. As evident above in which Haziq states that the minimal qualification needed for subsistence in Singapore was a degree as well as his experiences with recruitment interviews.

Apart from the normative assumption that qualifications were necessary for subsistence in Singapore and it's provision of access to a range of benefits that correlated to one's education level, the statement also hides the tension between internalised ideals and the reluctance to 'play along' to societal norms about education and work. The resistance to change is met by the realisation that it is

futile to play society's game of merits and that education is, in fact, an important determinant of individual occupational outcomes and their economic status (Hannum & Buchmann, 2003). It is evident that Bourdieu's idea that certification legitimises and reifies an individual's position and education capital is particularly valuable in understanding the rationalisation of one's position. It is also these qualifications which culminates as 'badges of ability'. In becoming badges of ability, it thus raises the question of who is qualified to wear them and what happens when they do. As Sennett and Cobb echoes Bourdieu in stating that it legitimises its wearer:

> *The testing of ability acquires legitimacy in the eyes of practitioners as the continuation of an old glorification of the individual apart from the social conditions into which he is born. That ability is the badge of individual worth… To connect ideology and the people, we need to understand what happens to people when they wear badges of ability* (Sennett & Cobb, 2023, p.62).

Importantly, the question of badges of ability is a question of dignity. It raises the question of the need to restore the injured dignity by acquisition of more capital (primarily those cultural, educational and economic in nature) and legitimising it. 30-year-old full-time registered nurse who works in the operating theatre, David, felt that:

> **clicks tongue* let's just-… let's just face it lah I mean it's… we… *clicks tongue* I think from the perspective of those who… aren't studious right, they don't want to further their studies. I'm a bit… I won't say I'm very studious. I'm a little bit studious sometimes when it comes to pursuing my degree. Yes, I can be a… I can be the one that's lagging. But in poly, it's about not giving up on what you're doing. At the end of the day, your- your employers are not gonna compare, not gonna give you the pay raise just because your GPA is higher than someone else right? I mean… not really because honestly speaking is that it's about giving your best. It's about getting the experience. Getting the… understanding from both a macro and micro point of view. To understand what society is thinking y'know. Because the thing is this right. If you think about it technically, they're just like "okay you got the skills, okay then let's just do for it ". Like they're not like thinking. They're being molded into… they're being what they are supposed to do. They're being dictated on what they're supposed to do.*

Although not a sentiment shared and disclosed by the majority of the participants but often hinted, David's statement distinguishes between two groups within the stigmatised collective: (1) the hardworking ITE student, and (2) those who *give up.* The distinguishing factor is the individual's decision to progress in their education and careers – to be classified as one of the "good ones" is to subscribe to the narrative of meritocracy and to reproduce these narratives through progression in one's social position and in the accumulation of more resources or identity capital.

6.4 Navigating Social Structures

Another finding within the theme of differentiated trajectories were the limited "choices" made available to these individuals in the transitions between educational institutions and the ability to strategically navigate through social structures to reach one's aspired position. Unlike Hodkinson and Sparkes idea of horizon for action, which is defined as being "the arena within which actions can be taken and decisions made", the study finds that individuals participated in the careful deliberation of identity capital management through social structures which are constantly changing. The act of navigating is influenced by the interrelation between opportunity structures and habitus (1996, p.34). This is especially obvious in the circumstance of the participants in which their results for the secondary school major exam (the GCE 'N' or 'O' levels) did not qualify them for further studies in their preferred courses, and thus they expressed that they found the offered courses to be limited and irrelevant to their passion. As a result, participants settled for what they perceived as the better option amongst the rest. In comparison with other normative academic pathways in Singapore, what was particularly interesting about these individuals were the social conditions presented to them, particularly the limited social capital available and accessible, as well as their ability to strategise and

plan their academic and career paths in aligning to their future aspirations amidst these social constraints.

David points out that despite his academic stream as a normal academic student, he had failed to qualify for polytechnic and thus chose the Nitec in electrical engineering course without much thought. Although he dropped out of his initial course, he quickly pointed out that he entered Nitec in nursing after his enlistment as a medic which he felt enabled him to "have a little advantage apart from the rest". Interestingly, David's pathway makes it apparent the efforts to consciously plan and decide at each stage how he could strategically utilise his available resources and leveraged on his social position to move towards his interest which he has a limited idea of. When probed about his future trajectory, it is evident that although not entirely undefined, David's career aspirations in the midst of limitations and present circumstances results in consciously navigating through social structure at each stage of his life transition. He states:

> *I think honestly for me is more about, like, getting something that's sustainable for the time being and, in this case, since I am educated here, and I think nursing is the more viable option, or current viable option for me. So instead, and of course in terms of post-graduate, I'll probably be pursuing a masters in, maybe like a business administration or social policies, and all those backend stuff.*

What is "sustainable for the time being" may thus not be aligned to one's interest but can be changed when one's set of choices within, what is perceived to be, the horizon for action changes. In perceiving Institute of Technical Education as a steppingstone, participants agreed that despite the perceived stigma, the act of having 'to settle for second best' enabled them to avoid challenges to their potential weaknesses (such as weaknesses which were innate or required the individual to have the cognitive capacities to process theory and knowledge) and increased access to opportunities. William, a 24-year-old first year full-time student pursuing a bachelor's degree in pharmaceutical engineering at the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) and who works as a part-time rugby coach, highlights that he had considered multiple factors in his post-secondary education decision and had to convince his parents who were apprehensive of his decision to enter ITE. He avidly recalls his decision-making process and stated:

> *I think my first aim was obviously Poly Foundation Programme. I was an 'N' Level student so… um… I just didn't want to do 'O' levels 'cause I knew I won't do very well in a textbook situation where it was just reading and then exams so I decided maybe ITE would be better for me because they are hands-on learning style and maybe more industry focused experience. That's why I chose ITE and also because I decided that it would, in the long run, have worked out better for me because… I knew that I want… if I didn't do too well in ITE I could still go out and work because of that certificate that I possessed. So that was… That was one of the few major contributing factors to why I chose to do ITE. Yeah… I think it is advertised all over their website [that it is more hands-on] and also a lot of seniors who have graduated from ITE always tell you "oh yeah, we spent majority of the week in our labs and in our internships always very…" how should I say…. "it's very similar to what it's like in the working world". And that's why I chose it lah. 'Cause I knew that it would suit me…. My field was um… science. Specifically Chemical Technology and back then I was very interested in pharmacy, and I knew that Chemical Technology would be one of those steppingstones to get me into a good healthcare related programme be it in poly or university or any other institution. Which is why I picked Chemical Technology, as opposed to Chemical Processing or Biotechnology because it opened the most number of doors for me yeah.*

Apart from the pathway focused planning in the education-career trajectory, it is worth noting that respondents were acutely aware of the resources that they had accumulated or that were available in their social environment. Like William who maximised his chances of entering university so that he could pursue a career in pharmaceutical science – utilising his involvement in rugby competitions and

his internship and contracted employments at neighbourhood clinics, pharmaceutical companies and triage work in hospitals and non-profit organisations) – David, similarly leveraged on hospital sponsorship bonds and opportunity structures within the hospital to pursue further studies. The result of being aware of one's accumulated resources, the available resources in the social environment, and the reflexivity of the individual and their social location is the psycho-social ability to strategically organise, manage and direct one's efforts in a meaningful way – where agency integrates with social structures.

From an in-group perspective, the idea of "ITE as a steppingstone" takes a different form, Apart from being understood as a temporal position and social leverage, the statement carries a heavier weight to these individuals and should be understood in conjunction to the education-based stigmatisation attached to the institution by the public, whereby it results from: (1) the ideological belief in education meritocracy, and its influence on the perception and reproduction of class in streaming system, (2) the perception of ITE as an educational safety net which allows one to overcome their stigma status. With meritocracy deeply ingrained, individuals develop a set of dispositions which set them apart from the negative stereotypes of ITE delinquents, these include their hardworking and resilient nature as well as their desire to overcome the ascribed stigma which they received in their youth.

Chapter 7: Discussion

These findings illustrate the complexities of education-based stigmatisation on the transitions to young adulthood and the influences of ideological beliefs and practices on the individual (Meisel et al., 2022). While at a structural level, progression to attain higher educational qualification or to pursue further studies were perceived to be an avenue for human capital development (Law, 2014; Lee & Kang, 2022; Neo et al., 2023). The process of deciding when to exit school and enter the workforce as well as how one is able to align their career aspirations to their passions and identity involved being able to integrate agentic actions in navigating social structures (Arnett et al., 2011; Benson & Elder, 2011) – where resources or identity capital (which encompasses the economic capital, social capital, cultural capital, education capital and psychological capital) are strategically managed, organised, and directed in a meaningful way towards one's identity (Côté, 2016). In the process of this shift in trajectories, individuals receive certificates which serve the function of signalling to others the legitimisation of the skills and ability to perform job-related task, and to validates the social position of the individual within the field on the basis of ones merits (Chua et al., 1999; Chua et al., 2022).

In the process of shifting trajectories and being awarded with certification in symbolically signifying the power to distinguish oneself from the negative stereotypes (Chiu, 2019; Daud, 2018; Ng, 2021; Salim, 2020) – which are characterised as individuals who do not subscribe to the meritocratic ideals of society (Koh, 2014; Solga, 2002), or having performed the qualities which demonstrates their desire to pursue progress according to the *rules of the game* (i.e., social mobility rewarded based on merit), or social outcasts like delinquents. However, in distinguishing themselves from their counterparts, they form a subgroup of "good students" who they perceive themselves to be the few who are motivated to resist and overcome negative stereotypes by pursuing opportunities to succeed (Sennett & Cobb, 2023). It is important to note, that in order for the "good students" to stand out and distinguish themselves, negative stereotypical masses are necessary (Bourdieu & Collier, 2020; Sennett & Cobb, 2023). Sennett and Cobb particularly highlight this relationship between the few and the many, wherein the "individuals exist so long as the mass exists as a point of reference consisting of others who seem pretty much alike" (2023, p.67). When taken into the account of the meritocratic narrative in Singapore and the prestige awarded to individuals who possesses both the appropriate dispositions and ability to utilise available capital or resources to pursue opportunities which provide

individuals the ability to be more upwardly mobile in their social positions despite their social and financial constraints (Côté,1996; Ho, 2015), the ability to distinguish and set apart oneself from the masses becomes a form of symbolic power that are rewarded to the few on the basis of deservedness and the ideological practices of meritocracy in education and work (Teo, 2019). From a Bourdieusian point of view, it is the social processes which legitimise the distribution of power and capital according to one's social position within the field (Bourdieu & Collier, 2020; Bourdieu, 2015; Swartz, 2020). This raises the questions on the rationalisation and phenomenological experiences of individuals who experience a double stigma, particularly ex-offenders and juvenile delinquents who face the double stigma from being convicted and their association to gang-related activities (as evident in news reports), and what are the strategies used to manage their identities within a crime intolerant society like Singapore. Further studies are necessary to understand how double stigmatised individuals navigate social structures, manage identity and strategically plan their trajectories.

In addition, despite top-down destigmatization efforts in Singapore wherein there is increased media exposure of successful ITE students as positive deviances, and the government support and initiation for education reforms aimed at equitable outcomes (Kwek et al., 2020; MOE, 2023; MOM, 2020), the study finds that individuals reported experiencing intense discomfort from the negative perception of their family and friends, as well as the changing perception of the general public in recent years. It is plausible that in response to the top-down destigmatization, individuals who had completed their ITE education became advocates in their own social networks (Boudewyns et al., 2015; Cullen et al., 2017; Sibitz et al., 2011; Warr, 2005) – as the study finds that individuals redefined and shared their experiences in ITE through their social networks and the social interactions with others who were deciding whether to enter the institution. Through this process of redefining and sharing of their experiences, individuals dilute the negative sentiment of stigma stereotypes (Walker & Lynn, 2013). To manage the stigma ascribed upon entry into the institution after secondary school, the study finds that individuals partake in two main strategies, within themselves and their social network: (1) the resistance to stigmatisation, and (2) overcoming their stigma. First, the resistance to stigmatisation by redefining their experiences and perception of ITE as a second chance and a steppingstone. In redefining the past abbreviation of ITE – "It's The End" to "It's Not The End" – it emphasizes the tenacity of the students to resist association of the institution to deviance and social exclusion, and to leverage on ITE as a social safety net to return to perceived normalcy in their education-career trajectory instead. In doing so, the individual is engaging in the strategic management of their identities, particularly in the deliberate and purposeful investment of existing identity capital for the accumulation of more capital in their education-career trajectory (Côté, 2002; Côté et al., 2015; Luyckx et al., 2011). It is evident in the study that individuals take great care to separate the negative image of ITE and emphasise the positive aspects and potential of further studies through an education-career pathway which begins in ITE. However, it is worth noting that the opportunity to progress and transition into polytechnic from ITE is perceived to require the individual to be intrinsically motivated and determined to "fight" for that chance; in other words, what determines the ability to ascend beyond the education status of an ITE certificate was the personal capacity of the individual to exercise reflexivity in their social position, the opportunity structures in society and the personal resources that one has (Luyckx et al., 2011; Vassilev et al., 2014). It is also this desire to "fight" for the opportunity to enter into polytechnic which develops the disposition of tenacity and the perseverance to perform well that gives rise to the image of the successful and hard working ITE student – a distinct disposition which is closely associated with this education status and a hallmark trait of this social class (Bernstein, 1981; Bourdieu, 2015).

A second strategy used to manage the self in response to ascribed stigma is to interpret the completion of post-secondary in ITE as being an ordeal that one has struggled with and overcome. Apart from the acquisition of a certificate which validifies the individual's ability to perform job-related skills, the act of graduating from ITE holds a symbolic significance to the individuals as it signifies that the individual has overcome the stigma by completing their education. This, in turn, becomes a badge of

ability closely associated with the injured dignity of the individual (Sennett & Cobb, 2023). From a Bourdieusian point of view, pursuing a higher education status result in the transition from one field to another and therefore entails the transformation of the habitus in response to the field and the capital (Bourdieu, 2015) – as the distinction between fields is separated by the boundaries governed by ideologically informed social structures (Lee, 2017). To restore the injured dignity from the ascribed stigma, individuals undertake a range of identity management strategies and agentic actions to acquire more identity capital, such as aligning their education-career trajectories to their passion or to pursue further studies in higher institutions. In doing so, the injured dignity, is perceived to be restored by the badges of ability attained through the tangible progress made in pursuing their self-defined ideas of success (Ingram, 2011; Sennett & Cobb, 2023). With the attainment of the ITE certificate and transitions to higher education statuses, such as a diploma or a degree, the individual perceives themselves as successful ITE stories who have attained badges of ability in their transition up the education ladder on the basis of meritocratic ideology and the display of their intrinsic habitus (abilities and hard work). And in response to the individual social encounters with the out-group in one's social networks, such as the family and friends, individuals act as advocates that seek to destigmatise the institution and the collective through the personal embodiment of the "ITE success story" in themselves. This finding is pivotal in understanding that the attempt to destigmatise the collective is a two-way causal relationship where top-down attempts result in the collective's response to echo the rhetoric put forth by positive deviances in the media (Chiu, 2019; Chua, 2022; Clair et al., 2016; Daud, 2018; ITE, n.d.). Importantly, the manner in which identity is managed within one's social network highlights the interaction of the self and the dominant ideology in society where dominant ideology is reinforced despite the individualisation of education-career pathway. In the individual response to personally embody the "ITE success story" to destigmatise the institution, the top-down curated narrative of meritocracy is reinforced, thus the individual becomes a model of ideological success.

Reflexively speaking, the view and understanding of the study is informed, in part, by my position and that of others within my social network – as mentioned above, these individuals include peers from my ITE cohort, as well as lecturers from ITE and polytechnic, both of which I have had the privileged of being acquainted with during my post-secondary life trajectory – and thus might be susceptible to selection bias. However, it was beneficial in providing a lens which enabled the present study to be situated within the larger narrative of meritocracy in Singapore, in particular the exploration of the educationally stigmatised individuals within Singapore's education system. What was intriguing during the course of this research was the changing landscape of the social environment and the education system by which ideological beliefs influenced the individual action and directed agentic action to navigate towards their goals. Additionally, in spite of the top-down efforts to destigmatise the community, individuals still reported feeling stigmatise and the intense negative feelings from the out-group (Ali, 2023; Wu, 2022). These statements contradict and undermines the integrity that the negative stereotypes associated with the ITE stigma has eroded or been diffused (ITE, 2021; MOE, 2018, 2023). It is plausible that the negative sentiments are socially carried and perpetuated by lecturers who were former ITE graduates (Hall, 2022) – as in the case of my own personal experiences wherein upon the first day of enrolment into the institution educators would attempt to encourage their students that "It's Not The End", and in the personal accounts of my peers in other ITE colleges of who, unfortunately, are not a respondent in the present study. If the sentiment is indeed socially carried and perpetuated by lecturers, then it may be more detrimental to the self-perception of its students. Future research aimed at studying this contradiction might find it beneficial to explore the origins of the statement "It's The End" and the classroom social interactions between lecturers and their students.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

In conclusion, the study contributes to our understanding of education-based stigmatisation in Singapore and its influence on the decision-making process involved in the school-to-work transitions of the community. In particular, the findings highlight how educationally stigmatised and disadvantaged individuals perceive young adulthood transition and rationalises their experiences through an ideological lens of meritocracy – this by which, results a myriad of social processes which are ingrained with power to distribute capital, determine the deservedness of the individual to stand out, and legitimises the identity capital and social position of the individuals from the collective. Importantly, the study provides an opportunity to explore how in redefining and embodying the “ITE success story” within one’s social network and social interactions, the individual responds to top-down destigmatization by personalising and sharing their experiences in a positive light – which ultimately serve to dilute negative stereotypes within one’s social sphere and within the improve out-group’s perception of the stigmatised collective.

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