ATLANTIS
PRESS

Bureaucracy, Meritocracy, and Inequality: A Critical Examination of Singapore's Streaming System

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ABSTRACT

Once dubbed a great social leveller, Singapore's education system became the centre of parliamentary debates in 2019. Upon voting, the current streaming system will be replaced by subject-based banding(SBB) in 2024[1]. This subject-based banding means that students can take different levels (G1, G2, G3) of subjects based on their ability. For instance, a student who is weak in English language but exceptional in mathematics might opt for G1 English and G3 mathematics. Such a change reflects the general consensus that streaming hinders the potential of students and that inequality exists in the current education landscape. Therefore, this essay aims to give a theoretical ground to and justification of the scrapping of the streaming system and show that the new SBB system, though promising, is unlikely to solve inequality at its core.

Keywords: social policies, sociology, inequality, education, Singapore

1. INTRODUCTION

Education has long been considered a social leveller and a means for the underprivileged to attain success. In fact, Singapore has long promoted meritocracy, a system where everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status, is allowed an equal opportunity to succeed based on a standardised test.[2] However, the question remains--- is there truly a level playing field? This essay aims to explore whether the current education system upholds justice, or in reality perpetuates inequality. This might then provide an insight into future education policies, and what the society can do to be more fair and inclusive.

2. THE STREAMING SYSTEM AND MODERNIZATION

The earliest version of streaming divides students into Special Courses, Express Courses, and Normal Courses. The Normal Courses was further differentiated into Normal (Academic) [N(A)] and Normal (Technical) [[N(T)] in 1994, with the latter granting 15%-20% of the cohort--who would have otherwise dropped out after primary school--secondary education.[3] Students from Special and Express Courses would pursue further education in Junior Colleges, which are easier pathways to local and overseas universities. N(T) students, on the other hand, would receive training in vocational schools, locally named Institute of Technical Education, or ITE (see Figure 1). Admittedly, the policy is designed to be flexible and to ensure a certain level of mobility. Students are able to transfer to a different stream upon meeting the requirements set by their respective schools.[4] However, such mobility is often limited, as students find it difficult to adjust to a new and more academically rigorous stream. In the account of an N(T) student, "The jump from Normal (Tech) in Secondary 1 to Normal Academic in Secondary 2 is already so big… how am I going to cope when the subjects are so different".[5] In fact, only 5 N(T) students transferred to N(A) stream at the end of Secondary School 4 in 2017.[6] This shows a relative rigidity of the streaming system, as the chance of advancing to a different stream is low.

Such a streaming system was deemed rational, if not desirable, in the 20th century: It was first implemented to accommodate a growing need for industrialization and nation building in the 1970s.[7] After the separation from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore emphasized on efficiency and productivity, in a quest for economic development.[8] Therefore, the streaming system resembles George Ritzer's theory of McDonaldization, which was built upon Max Weber's definition of bureaucracy as formal rationality that brings about efficiency.[9]

Streaming firstly allows for efficiency in the education sector. Instead of placing all students under the same set of curriculum, streaming allows for a higher level of specialization. Students who are less academically inclined have the chance of learning technical skills such as computer applications at a slower pace, which enables them to enter the workforce with adequate knowledge. This differentiation in the content of learning is an "efficient way of sorting students into groups for efficient teaching and learning".[10] Calculability and control are ensured as students go through standardized tests and are streamed based on the numerical results they acquire in the Primary School Leaving Examination(PSLE). This makes the process of streaming more predictable and manageable. The Ministry of Education (MOE) will also have a more targeted and differentiated approach in the recruitment, training, and allocation of teachers to different schools based on the enrollment data of each stream. Streaming, and the relative rigidity of it, make the outcome of education more predictable. Streaming allows the government to gauge how many lawyers, scientists, technicians, or blue-collar workers the education system will eventually produce. Therefore, the government can tailor the curriculum or policies to attract students into a particular sector that is lacking manpower.

This seems to suggest that a high level of rationality and efficiency lies in the streaming system, as it fits tightly with the characteristics of formal rationality as described by Weber and developed by Ritzer. From an economic standpoint, streaming seems to yield benefits. However, we must factor in the social perspective when judging whether a policy is justified.

3. THE PERPETUATION OF INEQUALITY

Inequality permeates Singapore society, as reflected by the Gini coefficient of 0.452 as of 2020.[11] Social reproduction will contribute to the tension between the "haves" and "have nots". In this section, I will prove that streaming perpetuates this unequal distribution of wealth and resources, using Bourdieu's theories of social reproduction and symbolic violence.

3.1. Habitus, Capital, and Fields

Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction expands from a purely economic perspective and includes the passing on of social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital across generations.[12]

Habitus is a person's disposition, which reflects his/her way of thinking in "a habitual state". It is "a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination", often shaped by social surroundings.[13] Habitus contributes to a child's ability to acquire capital.

Streaming reinforces the notion of social reproduction. Well-to-do families are better able to send their children to Special or Express streams. Tables 1 and 2 show that more affluent households, as reflected by the better quality of housing, are more likely to send their children to Special Streams such as the Integrated Programme(IP). These students often have a better footing and have a higher chance of participating in tertiary education. In turn, these children are more likely to acquire high-paying jobs using university diplomas, further accumulating capital for their offspring. The passing on of capitals can be exemplified in the following areas:

Firstly, economic and cultural capital often reinforce each other. Tuition, for instance, is becoming increasingly prevalent in Singapore, with a S$1.4 billion spending from October 2017 to September 2018.[14] Extra tuition fees typically range from S$25-S$90 per hour on the secondary school level, which is unaffordable for less privileged households. This means that children with financial resources can receive extra academic help and practice whereas their underprivileged counterparts cannot. Streaming makes this difference in academic performance more acute by dividing children into different streams and predetermining their future paths at a young age. Extracurricular and enrichment activities that will train creativity, critical thinking, and aesthetic appreciation also require a huge financial input. This further places the poorer households in a disadvantaged position.

Cultural capital can also be gained through a conducive family environment. Parental influence can be critical in a child's developmental stage.[15] Parents can cultivate children's habit of reading and emphasise the importance of education. A more tangible outcome in a racially diverse Singapore would be the language spoken at home. English is the general mode of communication in households with higher educational qualifications (see Table 3). Among the Chinese racial group in Singapore in 2005, 48.5% of the university graduates speak English most frequently at home, as compared to 5.3% for those who have below secondary education.[16] This means that students from families with higher educational attainment are more likely to be fluent in formal, instead of colloquial English, thereby excelling in English examinations.

Social capital is acquired through social connections and networks. An example would be the primary school enrollment process. In the status quo,[17] there are six registration phases upon entering a primary school. Phase 1, 2(A), and 2(B), which ensure a high chance of enrollment, are all based on alumni association. This means that as long as the sibling(s) or parent(s) of a student is attending or attended school, the student's

application will be considered first in the enrollment exercise. In the meantime, secondary schools often grant preferential admission to students from affiliated primary schools. This means that streaming perpetuates rigid social connections and further prevents interaction among students from differing backgrounds. In the same vein, higher educational qualifications become a form of symbolic capital, commanding trust and respect in a social setting, as well as a reflection of competence in the job market.

3.2. Stigmatization

Stigmatization further hinders students from the N(T) stream, who advance to ITE after taking the N(T) Level examination, from achieving their fullest potential. Labelled as failure, N(T) students often find themselves facing prejudice and discrimination from society. Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence is "violence wielded with tacit complicity between its victims and its agents". This includes the imposition of norms or ideology on the subordinated groups by the dominant groups in the society. This imposition often legitimizes and naturalizes the status quo. In this case, the general perception of the ITE students might be accepted by the ITE students themselves, creating a self-limiting narrative and further reducing social mobility.

Stigmatization against the N(T) stream has been a persisting problem in Singapore. In 2014, a Facebook profile named Heather Chua posted disparaging remarks about ITE graduates, angering many Singapore netizens. (Figure 2). A recent post of an alleged WhatsApp screenshot showing a tutor blaming her student for attending ITE again sparked indignation (Figure 3)[18]. From analyzing multiple posts on popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, we can conclude that many ITE students suffer from stigmatization and microaggression, which, despite not being extreme as the aforementioned incidents, hurts their self-esteem and changes their perception of themselves. Words such as "disappointment", "lower status", and "stupid" are used when making derogatory comments or describing the general societal perspectives towards ITE students. Graduates from ITE are often associated with a lower socioeconomic status that comes from the inability to secure jobs with decent salaries.

To reduce stigmatization, the media tries to portray ITE students as persevering and have the latent potential of achieving late success(Figure 4). However, the media's effort in constructing a "positive image" of the students is met with skepticism, as netizens doubt whether these

success stories are or should be the rarity(Figure 5 & 6). Still, in many ITE students' opinions, the prevailing societal view seems to assume N(T) and ITE students to be of a lower social class, unworthy of interactions(see Figure 7).

The encouraging messages that ITE graduates commented to debunk the label of "failure"(Figure 8) reflects the disrespect with which society treats them. While inspiring, the comment implies that the ITE students have conceded to the societal opinion of them being academically backward and perhaps having a less than outstanding level of Intelligence Quotient(IQ). That is, they concede to their inability to excel academically, instead of finding the institutional biases. They, therefore, emphasize the narrative of "determination and hard work" to compensate for this "inability".

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They have a lower sense of self and tend to accept others' value judgement of themselves, unconsciously submitting to societal labeling. This creates a self-fulling prophecy and limits ITE students' ability to achieve greater heights.

4. REIMAGINING EDUCATION

The new SBB system, which will be in place in 2024, blurs the boundaries of different streams and allows students to choose the difficulty level of subjects based on their strengths. The benefit is that students will be able to learn the subjects they are interested in at a more in-depth level, regardless of their performance in other subjects. However, it is unlikely to eliminate the inequality that is so entrenched in Singapore. This is because the characteristics and phenomena discussed in section 3 remain the same. The well-to-do families will still ensure that their children excel in every subject at the highest level, and have an outstanding extracurricular profile. Meritocracy as a national identity means that selections and differentiation of students based on merit will still exist.[19]

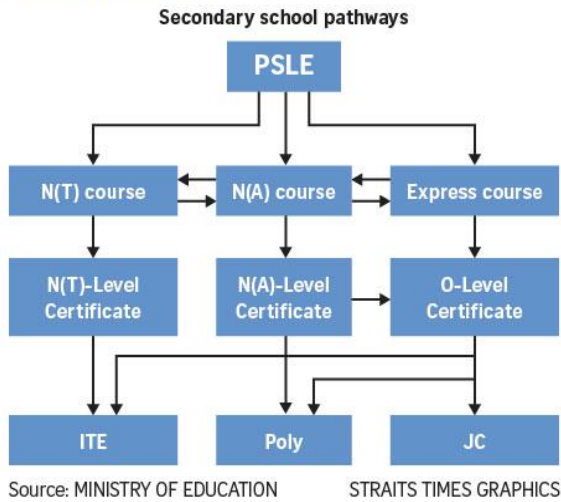**Figure 1:** different pathways for different streams[1]

Figure 2: sample post of derogatory remarks against ITE graduates
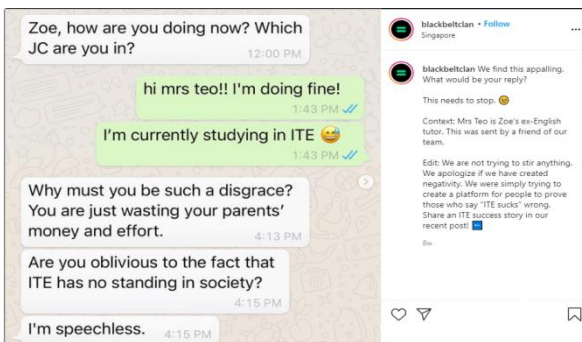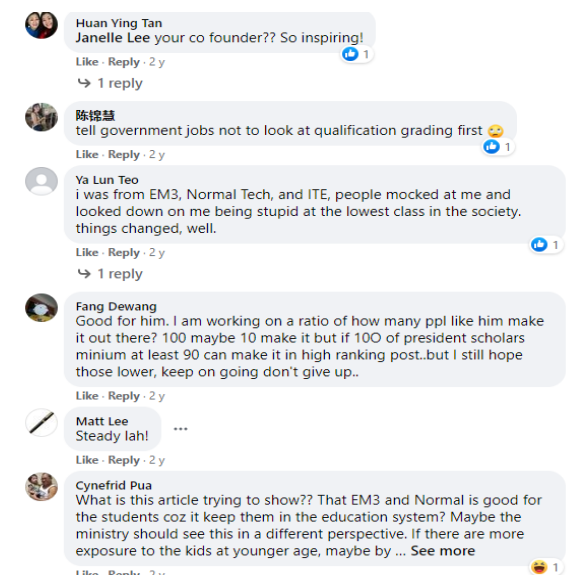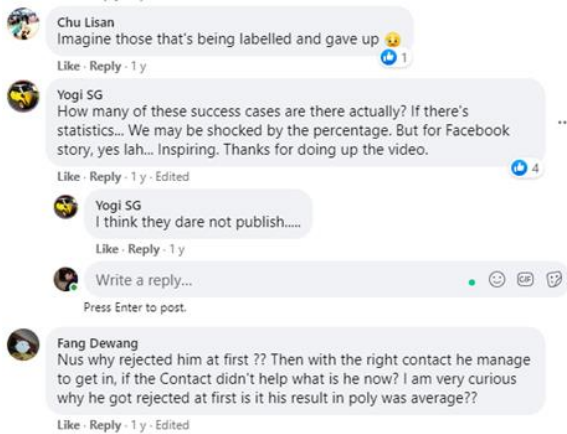

Figure 3: A viral post that shows a WhatsApp screenshot of a tutor blaming her student for entering ITE

Figure 4: sample of an encouraging post that aims to de-stigmatise ITE education

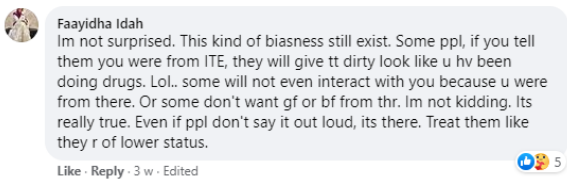**Figures 5 & 6:** reactions towards the post

Figure 7: People commenting on the negative societal perceptions towards ITE students
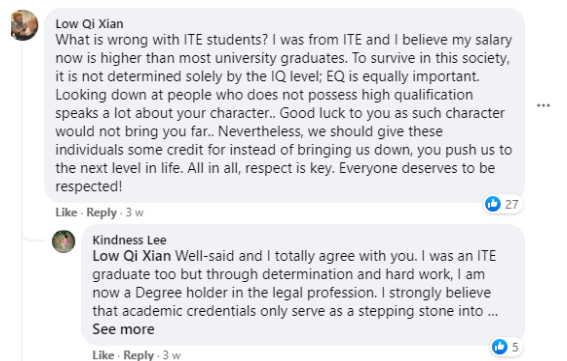

Figure 8: ITE students' comments towards their great potential and their desire for respect

Table 1: Different housing and enrollment in different school types; source: Singapore Children's Society, The Straits Times

	primary school pupils			secondary school students		
	type 1	type 2	type 3	type 1	type 2	type 3
private housing	39%	25%	3%	30.7%	16%	2%
at least one parent who completed the	74%	47%	33%	53.5%	24%	17%

university						
monthly household income over $10,000	48%	29%	12%	40.7%	25%	7%

Type 1: Integrated Programme(IP) schools, their affiliated primary schools, and primary schools which offered the Gifted Education Programme(a better stream than Express)

Type 2: Government-aided schools and autonomous schools which did not offer the IP(mostly include only Express stream)

Type 3: Government Schools(include Express, N(A), and N(T) streams)

Table 2: source: Census of Population, 1980, No.6:34; Straits Times, 16 January 1992

	proportions		participation rates	
housing type	1980	1990	1980	1990
private houses/private flats	0.395	0.230	3.2	2.1
1–3 room HDB flats	0.279	0.320	0.5	0.7

Table 3: Resident Non-student Population Aged 15 Years and Over by Language Most Frequently Spoken at Home and Highest Qualification Attained in 2005

Resident Non-student Population Aged 15 Years and Over by Language Most Frequently Spoken at Home and Highest Qualification Attained (per cent)

ethic group/language	below secondary	secondary	post-secondary	university
Chinese	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

English	5.3	29.6	34.4	48.5
Mandarin	42.4	49.6	49.3	38.5
Chinese dialect	52.1	20.6	16.1	12.3
Others	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.7

5. CONCLUSION

While streaming perpetuates inequality, SBB is unlikely to effectively address the stratification or revolutionize the education landscape in Singapore. The focus of educational policies should therefore be enhancing social mobility. This can be done by granting more capitals to the disadvantaged children. For instance, beyond providing financial assistance to students already enrolled in primary or secondary schools,[20] government-subsidized enrichment lessons can be provided to children from a young age, giving them exposure to art, literature, creative thinking, and music. The phasing system that allocates students to different primary schools based on alumni connections and housing proximity can be modified to be more randomized and grant equal access to prospective students. Destigmatization is equally important. The government should expand the narrow definition of merit and success in the Singapore narrative. Apart from academic performance, a student's aptitude and attitude should be given more recognition in the school admission exercise.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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