

The Formation Logic and Resolution Paths of the Stigmatization of Vocational Education

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Abstract: Aiming at transforming from a large manufacturing country into an advanced manufacturing and educational nation, China has endowed vocational education a new mission. However, for a long time, vocational education has been considered as “inferior students,” “second education,” and leading to “undignified employment,” by the public, resulting in low reputation and social status. Employing Goffman’s stigma theory as the theoretical foundation, integrated with labeling theory and structural stigma, this paper systematically elucidates the generative logic of the stigmatization of vocational education. This stigma originates from the cultural gap between the virtual identity presupposed by the public and the real identity of vocational education itself, is solidified by the academic-vocational tracking system that uses academic performance as a sole criterion, is reproduced in daily social interactions through “mixed contacts,” and ultimately forms structural exclusion through a vicious cycle of internalized self-identity and resource attrition. The research shows that the “destigmatization” of vocational education lies within both the institutional reconstruction and reshaping social recognition. For the one thing, the integration of general and vocational education should be further improved and an upward pathway from secondary vocational schools to higher vocational colleges to vocational undergraduate programs and to professional master and doctor degrees should be broadened to change the identity norms institutionally. For the other thing, cultivate “the wise,” thorough intergroup contact and build a positive online image with the help of career enlightenment and inter-school interactions to break the stereotypes to make vocational education from a “passive fallback” to an “active choice” from a cognitive aspect. These measures provide both theoretical support and a practical pathway for building a strong educational nation and constructing a skills-based society.

Keywords: Vocational Education; Stigma; Erving Goffman.

1. Introduction

Currently, one of the key challenges to transform China from a “large manufacturing country” to a “advanced manufacturing nation” is to transform its biggest and well-equipped manufacture industries into cut-edged technical ones. It is to developing vocational education, building a diversified education system and cultivating high-tech talents that can solve the core issue of technical constraints in achieving high-quality development. The report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasized prioritizing education development, marking the first time “building a strong education nation” was established as a foundational project for realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Xi, 2017). In 2025, the “Outline of the Plan for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024–2035),” issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council, listed the “industry-education integrated vocational education system” as one of eight major educational systems requiring comprehensive construction, clarifying the foundational role of vocational education within the overall strategy of building a strong education nation (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & State Council, 2025). However, vocational education has long been labelled as “inferior student,” “second education,” and “undignified employment,” demonstrating its low reputation and social statue in the reality. On one hand, socio-developmental transformation urgently needs vocational education to supply high-tech talents. On the other hand, vocational education has long been trapped in the dilemma of stigmatization, the conflict between which constitutes the core problem studied in this report.

At present, there are various explorations and discussions on the practical dilemma of the stigmatization of vocational education from multiple dimensions. Tian Degang and Jiang Jianhua (2025) systematically summarizes three realistic manifestations of the stigma faced by vocational education: the individual stigma of “underachievers,” the school stigma of “second education,” and the occupational stigma of “undignified employment,” revealing the outward expressions of vocational education’s stigmatization with field observations and interviews. Yang Yu, Wu Zunmin, and Chen Xiaoyu (2023) trace the causes of stigmatization back to multiple deep-seated factors, including the cultural influence of the traditional conventions such as “scholarly pursuits are noble and vocational pursuits are treated with caution,” the lagging development of the modern independent enrollment and examination system, the separation between enterprise production and educational practice, and the shortage of high-quality “dual-qualification” teaching staff, uncovering the underlying causes of stigmatization.

Qi Zhanyong and Wu Siyuan (2025), drawing on the three-dimensional analytical framework of social identity theory, systematically points out that skill-based higher education institutions currently face three core dilemmas: identity stigmatization, value derogation, and the failure of institutions’ “positive distinctiveness” strategies, and they proposed resolution pathways from the cognitive, evaluative, and behavioral dimensions. From these studies, it can be seen that the discussions on the stigmatization of vocational education are increasingly diverse from phenomenon description and cause analysis to theory construction and resolution pathways.

However, existing researches mostly focus on the objective

attribution of vocational education stigmatization and practical suggestions, lacking a theoretical analysis of how vocational education becomes stigmatized. This makes it difficult to find the destigmatization pathway systematically. The renowned sociologist Erving Goffman defines stigma as a “spoiled identity,” emphasizing that it is not an inherent attribute of the individual but is constructed through the discrepancy between “virtual social identity” and “actual social identity” in social interactions. This theoretical perspective offers a distinctive analytical direction for revealing the formation mechanisms of vocational education stigmatization and can provide a systematic theoretical framework for the practical design of destigmatizing vocational education, which awaits deeper and more systematic elaboration in future research.

2. The Generative Logic of the Stigmatization of Vocational Education

The stigmatization of vocational education originates from the vast discrepancy between the “virtual social identity” society presupposes and its “actual social identity.” In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Erving Goffman defines stigma as a “spoiled identity,” whereby an individual suffers a damaged reputation and is seen as a flawed person because they possess an attribute that society questions and rejects. When the individual’s “actual social identity” deviates from the “virtual social identity” it ought to, it is interpreted as a “failing” or a “shortcoming” (Goffman, 1963). In traditional Chinese cultural thought, education was endowed with the lofty mission of cultivating “statesmen capable of governing” and “those who labor with their minds” (Mencius, 1980). The adage “Those who excel in learning become officials” established the orthodox status of the knowledge-based path to advancement. At the same time, the hierarchical sequence “scholars, farmers, artisans, merchants” placed other laborers below the literati, forming the status hierarchy of “Those who labor with their minds govern others; those who labor with their strength are governed by others” (Confucius, 1980). Confucius’s response to Fan Chi’s question about farming—“Fan Chi is indeed a petty man!” (Yang, 2009)—vividly reveals this educational value orientation: education should aim at the “mental” work of governance and scholarship rather than the “physical” labor of farming and planting. This cultural gene has persisted to the present, forming society’s “virtual identity” presupposes for education: true education should cultivate “mental laborers” who are detached from direct physical labor. However, the “actual identity” of vocational education is precisely to cultivate skilled talents laboring in production activities, and its graduates moving towards the career paths of “physical laborers.” When there is a significant gap between society’s presupposed “virtual identity” for education and the “actual identity” of vocational education, the latter is interpreted by society as an “inadequate education”—it cannot cultivate “statesmen,” but the fallback of “physical laborers.” “Physical laborers” have historically been associated with “meaninglessness” and “thoughtlessness.” Aristotle describes them as “lacking reason themselves, only able to sense the reason of others” (Aristotle, 1965). Because of association with “dirtiness” and “low skill,” physical laborers have long been considered undignified workers (Hughes, 1951). When the technical

occupations will be taken by vocational education graduates are stigmatized as undignified employment, the graduates themselves are correspondingly stigmatized as undignified workers. This identity stigma systematically devalues its educational worth and considers its learners as an inferior group destined for “undignified work.”

Because of conventional views on learning, the general-vocational tracking system has been misinterpreted by the public, and vocational education is regarded as a way to remove the “incapable.” China adopts a dual-track education system, in which the tracking of general and vocational education is mainly judged by secondary school entrance examination scores. This system originally is designed to provide multiple choices and educate students according to their interests and aptitudes. However, long dominated by conventional views about learning such as “those who excel in learning become officials,” the public interprets tracking as a method of judging learning ability and ranking individuals. Society habitually employs an implicit “identity norm” to draw boundaries between people: those conforming to the norm are “normal,” while those who deviate become “stigmatized.” Such categorization is fundamentally an exercise of power, simultaneously defining what is “normal” and legitimizing the denigration of those who deviate (Goffman, 1963). Entering general high school is perceived as the “orthodox educational pathway,” while entering vocational schools is seen as the result of “terminal elimination,” for being a scholar is indeed the orthodox direction of learning expected in traditional culture. Research indicates that China’s general-vocational tracking system has evolved into a system of stratification based on academic performance, where academic scores, rather than personal preference, dominate the choice between general and vocational pathways (Tian, Xue, & Yin, 2025). In practice, the general-vocational tracking system has long fallen into the trap of being “officially for categorization, but actually for stratification” (Zhan & Wang, 2023). Vocational school students are often socially perceived as the “incapable,” thus bearing a negative identity mark. From the perspective of “educational coating,” this is an action of labeling in schools. Educational coating means separating schools and students and constructing social distinctions by labeling. This mechanism not only affects individual self-identity but also solidifies social stratification at a macro level (Jin, 2022). The misinterpretation of the tracking system considers general high school students as “normal” individuals, while vocational students become “stigmatized” individuals deviating from the mainstream who are subjected to continuous denigration and exclusion.

The core of Goffman’s stigma theory lies in revealing that stigma is not an inherent attribute of individuals but a structural exclusion socially constructed through the exercise of power. It explains “stigma” socially rather than merely from the perspective of individual defects. The “stigma” will be continuously activated and reinforced when vocational students are keeping avoiding and concealing their identity. Stigma is not permanently affixed once applied, but is continually activated and intensified through “mixed contacts” between the “stigmatized” and “normal” individuals. When “normal” individuals display avoidance or discrimination against the “stigmatized” due to their identity, the “stigmatized” are compelled to engage in “identity management”—either by striving to conceal their stigma or by deliberately proving themselves (Goffman, 1963). As

Burkitt (2008) asserts: “The self and individual identity are formed in social activities, social relationships, and social contexts.” This viewpoint corroborates Goffman’s theory of stigma—that individual identities are not innate but are shaped within social interactions and relationship networks. When vocational schools are labeled as an inferior identity, vocational students will experience “identity anxiety” (Xu, 2023). Vocational students often avoid or conceal their school’s information when asked, “Which school did you graduate from?” for fear of being looked down upon. These “embarrassing moments” often occurs in daily social interactions precisely confirm Goffman’s assertion—that stigma is continuously constructed in interaction (Goffman, 1963). Even worse, when vocational students themselves feel they are inferior to others, society will prove it is true in turn. The society holds a low expectation regarding the academic performance and even conduct of vocational students, which makes vocational students give up themselves, then the stigma will be reinforced. Psychologists Rosenthal and Jacobson demonstrates that learners will internalize the expectations from teachers and society. If they receive high expectations, they are more likely excel in learning performance while low expectations will impose a negative effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). The “inferior student” label attached to vocational students, through everyday verbal cues, unequal opportunity, and comparison, gradually internalizes into students’ self-perception. They begin to believe they are truly “not good at studying,” thus reducing their efforts to improve academic performance and professional skills, and even giving up attempts to move upward. Consequently, what was initially merely external prejudice against vocational education becomes a catalyst for academic backwardness and lack of ambition among vocational students. In the end, stigma transforms from an external label into an internally identified, “self-fulfilling prophecy.”

The “self-fulfilling prophecy of stigmatization” leads to resource attrition, which hampers the quality improvement of vocational education. Low quality, in turn, reinforces the prejudice that “vocational education is inferior,” further exacerbating resource loss. Merton, borrowing from the biblical parable, described the cumulative advantage phenomenon in science: “For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath” (Merton, 1968). In education, It is demonstrated that schools with high reputation will attract more resources such as professional teacher, abundant subsidies and policy support, while vocational education with stigma faces resource depletion. Government funding, teacher quotas, and project support have long been skewed towards general education, with per-student funding for vocational colleges often falling below that of general high schools at the same level. Government subsidies, teacher quotas, and policy support often goes to general education, and per-student funding for vocational schools at the same level often lags behind. In 2023, China’s per-student general public budget expenditure for secondary vocational education was 17,869.01 yuan, lower than the 19,460.69 yuan for general high schools and even lower than the 18,257.34 yuan for junior high schools (Ministry of Education, 2023). Research data indicates there is a per-student funding gap of 7,674.246 yuan for China’s secondary vocational education, among which the largest gap is personnel funding (cited in Hou, Zhang, & Deng, 2025).

More seriously, due to low social status, poor salaries, and low self-achievement, teachers in vocational education are keeping quitting and new teachers are unwilling to apply for this position. For example, one teacher remarks: “Although our school is a higher vocational college and we are formal public service establishment requiring rigorous written tests and interviews, our salaries are the lowest compared to other municipal public institutions, especially the universities in this city. Clearly, neither the school nor society values vocational education much. (Ma, 2019)” “Stigmatization” causes vocational students’ self-negation and vocational schools’ resource attrition, and ultimately traps vocational education in a subordinate position as “second education.”

3. Paths for the “Destigmatization” of Vocational Education

The key to breaking the “stigmatization” of vocational education is to integrate general education with vocational education and diminish the identity distinction between them. Goffman’s discussion on “stigma” reveals that the core of “destigmatization” does not depend on individuals’ resistance, but on reforming the social norms that mark specific groups as “abnormal,” and cultivating the “wise” through social contact to break stereotypes (Goffman, 1963). This set of social norms is the general-vocational tracking mechanism that uses academic performance as the sole criterion. In the practice of tracking, schools enroll students according to their scores in secondary school entrance examination admissions. This standard of tracking will reinforce the stereotype that vocational students are the “incapable.” General-vocational integration aims to widen the channels of exchange between general and vocational education, moving from “tracking” to “integration.” In January 2025, the “Outline of the Plan for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024-2035),” issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council, explicitly states the need to “diversify schools’ varieties and integrate industries with schools” and to “benefit students’ growth through general-vocational integration” (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & State Council, 2025). Moreover, the outline also acclaims vocational students to enjoy an equal treatment in household registration, employment and career promotion (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & State Council, 2025). General-vocational integration can break down the barriers between the two types of education by establishing flexible mechanisms for mutual course selection, credit transfer, and student status exchange, allowing high school students to freely choose between the two educational pathways and better explore their abilities and interests. This dynamic mechanism breaks the static “one exam decides the future” tracking system, transforming vocational education into a free educational choice, thereby weakening the derogatory effect of educational coating.

It is another crucial measure to dismantle the identity “stigma” of vocational education that further broadening the way for vocational students to move forward in academy and releasing restrictions on employment and further studies. Goffman reveals that society habitually employs an implicit “identity norm” to draw boundaries between people. Those who are conform to the norm are “normal,” while those who deviate become “stigmatized.” Such categorization is an exercise of power, defining what is “normal” and “abnormal” to legitimize the denigration of those who deviate (Goffman,

1963). Therefore, the fundamental way of “destigmatization” is to reform the identity norm that defines specific groups as “abnormal.” For a long time, the channels for vocational education graduates to enter undergraduate programs have been narrow, with most students having no option but employment after graduation. However, the current job market has escalating academic requirements, placing vocational students at a persistent disadvantage due to the lack of avenues for academic advancement. Social identity theory posits that group members’ identity and social status perceptions are closely linked; when social identity needs are unmet, individuals may choose to leave their current group or strive to enhance its social status (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). When the vocational education group lacks opportunities for upward mobility, its members internalize external negative evaluations, forming “self-stigma.” Therefore, raising the ceiling for academic advancement in vocational schools and constructing a complete vocational education progression system from secondary vocational to higher vocational, vocational undergraduate, professional master’s, and even professional doctoral programs is a crucial institutional guarantee for breaking the “stigma” of vocational education. In recent years, the state has actively explored relevant policies. In 2025, Guizhou Province officially launched a vocational education college entrance examination reform, focusing on three major enrollment pathways: “the unified examination for secondary vocational students for higher education, the classified examination for higher vocational colleges, and the college upgrade examination for regular higher education institutions,” planning to fully implement the “vocational education college entrance examination” by 2028, gradually building a vocational education talent cultivation system that effectively links secondary, higher, and undergraduate levels (Provincial Department of Education, 2026). The Central Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang Revolutionary Committee further suggested in a proposal to the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference that supporting policies on student status and credits should be introduced, breaking the general-vocational barrier, formulating and revising student status policies, and exploring mutual course enrollment and credit recognition within the same city and same academic level for general and vocational integration (Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang, 2025). When vocational education can lead to higher education just like general education, public perceptions regarding its lack of development prospects can be reversed. Vocational students can advance to vocational undergraduate institutions through the vocational education college entrance examination, changing the perception of vocational education as a “dead-end education” and alleviating the anxiety of families who fear that “accepting vocational education means no chance to attend university” (Wang, Liu, & Zhao, 2026). When the institutional equality of vocational and general education becomes a reality, societal stereotypes about vocational education will gradually dissolve.

An important pathway for breaking down “stigmatization” lies in cultivating the “wise” and breaking stereotypes about vocational education through social contact. In analyzing the social construction of stigma, Goffman keenly noted that two types of people exhibit particular sympathy and acceptance towards the stigmatized: one is the “own,” those who share the same stigmatizing experience; the other is the “wise,” those who understand the stigmatized individual’s situation

and can offer understanding as a “normal” person (Goffman, 1963). As “normal” individuals truly understand the real situation of the “stigmatized” through social contact, the “stigma” will be dissolved gradually. The intergroup contact hypothesis in social psychology posits that provided with certain conditions, prejudice and hostility between groups can be reduced. These conditions include: equal status, common goals, institutional support and collaboration leading to successful outcomes in the contact. (Allport, 1954) For vocational education, this implies it needs to create equal contact between “normal” individuals and the vocational education groups. Specifically, social contact and the cultivation of the “wise” can be achieved through the following pathways. Firstly, systematically implement career exploration and vocational experience activities at the primary and secondary education levels, helping students to develop interest in and a correct understanding of vocational education. Secondly, build a platform for the communication between general and vocational schools, such as joint courses, club exchanges, and skill demonstrations to help them understand each other better. Thirdly, utilize online social media to widely disseminate outstanding vocational school students and vocational achievements, breaking the public’s “information cocoon”. When the vocational education groups no longer passively bear the stigma but actively build a positive image and demonstrates their own value, the public will gain a right understanding about vocational education. It is noteworthy that Goffman’s “wise” individuals not just refer to those who are sympathetic for the “stigmatized,” but a social relational structure capable of breaking the conflict between “normal” and “stigmatized,” making stigma no longer an insurmountable identity chasm but a comprehensible difference (Goffman, 1963). As vocational education gains increasing numbers of the “wise,” social perceptions about the vocational education will shift from a “fallback” to a “choice,” providing the social soil for repairing its spoiled identity.

4. Conclusion

The “stigmatization” of vocational education does not originate from inherent defects in education itself or in its students, but rather from prejudice against vocational education generated by traditional cultural concepts and negative social contacts collectively. Reshaping public perception of the value of vocational education is not only a matter of educational equity but also a crucial pathway for building a modern education system, a strong education nation, and a manufacturing powerhouse. Goffman’s stigma theory reveals that the core of “destigmatization” lies not in individual local resistance, but in reforming the social norms that mark specific groups as “abnormal,” and in cultivating the “wise” through social contact to break stereotypes. Only by promoting general-vocational integration, improving the academic advancement mechanisms for vocational schools, and fostering social contact can equality between vocational and general education be achieved, thereby changing the “stigma” of vocational education and channeling a continuous stream of talent for China’s high-quality development.

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