

## Nailing the notion

Having an elite in itself does not make a society elitist. What does is when those at the top restrict access to this charmed circle.

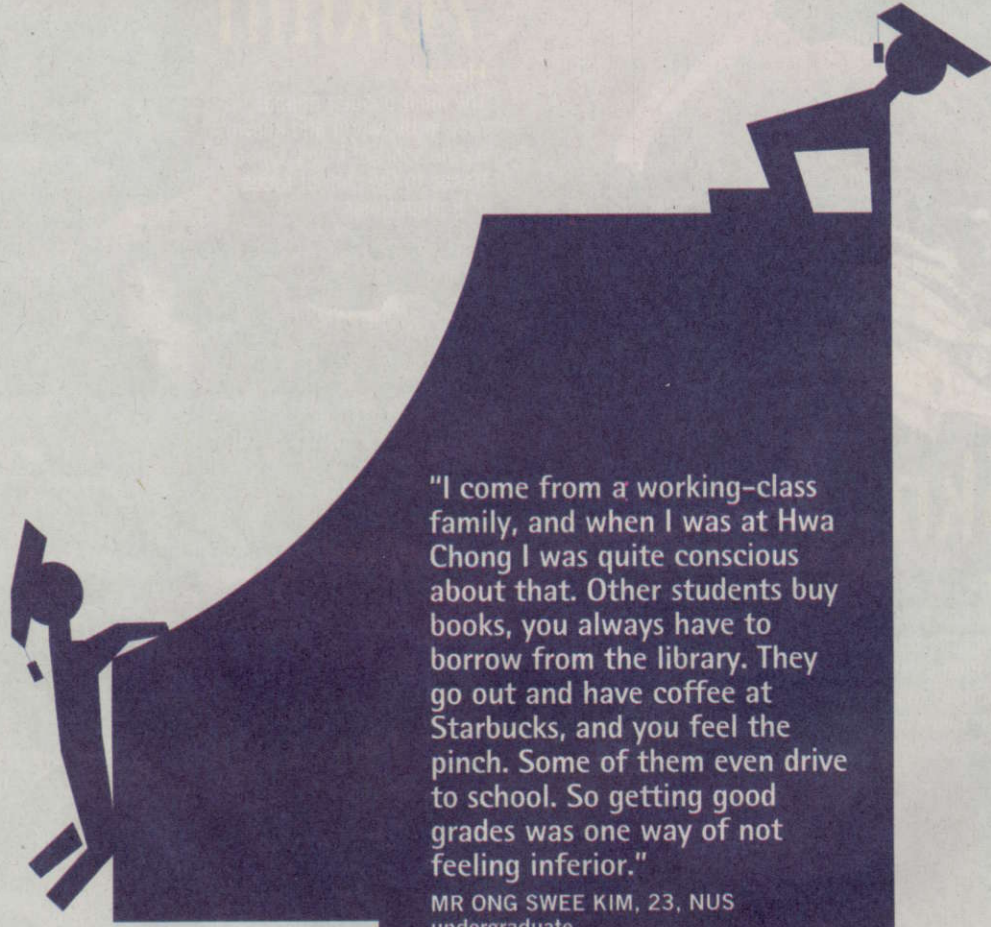
PAGE S11

# INSIGHT

THE STRAITS TIMES SATURDAY, MAY

## High AN ELITE

The term elitism is apt to Times survey suggests the widespread than one might wisdom, students in top so worry about being looked **Ken Kwek** takes a closer



"I come from a working-class family, and when I was at Hwa Chong I was quite conscious about that. Other students buy books, you always have to borrow from the library. They go out and have coffee at Starbucks, and you feel the pinch. Some of them even drive to school. So getting good grades was one way of not feeling inferior."

MR ONG SWEE KIM, 23, NUS undergraduate

"I get the impression that many students from these elite schools have very high IQ but very low EQ (emotional quotient). It's a generalisation, I know, but that's how I feel in my interactions with them at joint events. I also wonder whether their environment is too sheltered. You're surrounded by people of the same background that your sense of being 'better' is constantly being reinforced."

MISS CHIA CHOI QUEEN, 21, NUS undergraduate and a former student of Nanyang Junior College

"Those people who criticise the elite because they go to good schools or come from rich families, I think they're just envious or jealous. There's nothing wrong with being elite... Anyway, among my friends, we don't really think

**U**NDERGRADUATE Ng Guan Ling's A-level score of one A, two Bs and a C left her feeling inferior to her National Junior College schoolmates.

The 19-year-old, who is now studying business at Nanyang Technological University, recalls: "More than 80 per cent of my classmates got straight As."

Students like Ms Ng, who hail from top-ranked schools, are far more likely than their peers in non-elite schools to suffer from either an inferiority or superiority complex centred around academic scores.

That is one of the findings of a recent Straits Times survey of young people's views.

Overall, the findings point to what might be termed an "intra-elite anxiety" over elites and elitism, with students in top schools more likely to say they experience elitist behaviour and feel pressure to enter the ranks of the elite.

What do the survey findings reveal about the similarities and differences between students from top schools and those from humbler backgrounds? What light do they shed on how elit

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What do the survey findings reveal about the similarities and differences between students from top schools and those from humbler backgrounds? What light do they shed on how elitism plays out in the Singapore context?

And do they imply that longstanding concerns over Singapore becoming an elitist society divided along class lines, may perhaps be overblown?

## Intra-elite anxiety

IN A meritocracy, some individuals are bound to do better than others.

But one big worry is that the elites – that is, those who rise to the top of the Singapore system – will become a class unto themselves and fail to empathise with the needs and problems of the rest of society.

This could in turn breed resentment among those who do not make it to these top ranks, as they feel excluded and envious of those who do.

Such worries over a possible yawning gap between elites and non-elites occasionally boil over.

They did so most recently late last year, when then Raffles Junior College student Wee Shu Min, 18, posted a message on her online journal deriding another blogger for his worries over the job situation.

In her blog, she called the employee of a multinational company “one of the many wretched, undermotivated, overassuming leeches in our country” and told him to “get out of my elite, uncaring face”.

Her comments drew harsh responses from within the Web community and beyond.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also weighed in last December in a speech to the People's Action Party (PAP) conference. He urged successful Singaporeans not to forget the debt they owed to their family, friends and society.

Here is why the Straits Times survey findings add a new dimension to the ongoing discussion about elites and elitism.

For one thing, the survey threw up little evidence of elite envy among those from humbler backgrounds.

Instead, it found that students from top schools are far more likely than their peers to feel inferior and worry about being excluded from the elite group.

This seems linked to the hyper-competition over grades and constant comparisons with their peers that students in top schools have to grapple with.

The ST poll of 499 students aged 15 to 24 found that 38 per cent of elite-school students feel inferior to their schoolmates. Another 33 per cent said they feel superior.

By comparison, 29 per cent of their peers in non-elite schools felt inferior and 21 per cent felt superior.

schools or come from rich families, I think they're just envious or jealous. There's nothing wrong with being elite... Anyway, among my friends, we don't really think about this very often. We just try to work hard. Studies are important to us too and the competition motivates us.”

PAMELA CHOW, 16, a student from Ang Mo Kio Secondary School, who will take her O-level exams this year

“I did feel inferior, compared to those who took two Special Papers, for example. But conversely, I felt better than those who took only three A levels. I come from a school where it's pretty stressful, and if you don't get good grades, people will look down on you. It's not very healthy, I guess, but that's just the way it is.”

MISS ANGELIQUE CHAN, 19, who graduated from Raffles Junior College earlier this year and has been accepted at NUS Law School

“My guess is that the environment in elite JCs is very stressful. At my JC, we have a reputation of being more fun. Even if I had done well enough to get into RJC or Hwa Chong, I'd think twice about going. You have to come from a rich family, and be good at studies, sports, everything. It would be too much for me.”

JOANNA CHENG, 16, a first-year student at St Andrew's Junior College

“I don't feel superior or inferior in school, but at church, when I meet friends from neighbourhood schools, there's a distance. Some have commented that I'm 'too smart' for them. It's disappointing, and it affects the friendship.”

GRACE LUM, 18, a second-year student at Raffles Junior College

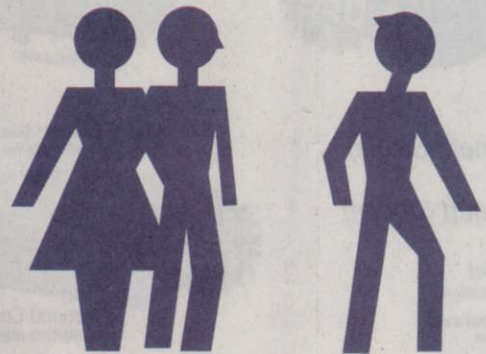
For the purposes of the survey, The Straits Times drew up its own list of 11 institutions which it defined as elite schools, based on past school rankings and reputation. (The list covered Anglo-Chinese School [Independent], Hwa Chong Institution, Methodist Girls' School, Nanyang Girls' High School, National Junior College, Raffles

Girls' School, Raffles Institution, Raffles Junior College, Singapore Chinese Girls' School, Temasek Junior College and Victoria Junior College.)

According to the findings, students in elite schools are twice as likely as their peers to have encountered elitist behaviour, with the figures at 41 per cent versus 21 per cent.

Those polled defined looking down on those who are academically weaker as the most common form of elitist behaviour.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser says this shows that perceptions of inferiority and superiority hinge very much on the environment a young person finds himself in.



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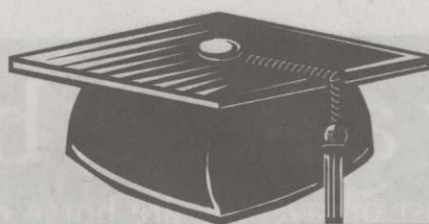
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# High anxiety

## AN ELITE AFFLICTION?

The term elitism is apt to trigger strong reactions, but a Straits Times survey suggests the angst over this phenomenon may be less widespread than one might have thought. And contrary to conventional wisdom, students in top schools are more likely than their peers to worry about being looked down upon or left out of the elite group. **Ken Kwek** takes a closer look at the survey findings and their implications

“Elite-school students operate in a highly competitive environment where getting only four As can be quite a disaster, whereas among the non-elite students, the people one compares with are somewhat similar in achievements, and it is not that difficult to outperform others,” he says.

The survey also found that top-school students are more likely to yearn to be part of the elite, even though fewer of them have a positive impression of elites here, compared to their counterparts from neighbourhood schools.

While 52 per cent of those from top schools said it is very important or somewhat important for them to be a member of the elite, only 41 per cent have a positive view of the elite.

For their peers in neighbourhood schools, the figures were 43 per cent and 51 per cent.

Both defined the elite as those who excel academically.

Mr Lee Hak Boon, principal of Catholic High School, says this could be due to students from top schools enjoying the “halo of prestige” they find handed to them, yet resentful of the “intense and sometimes unpleasant competition” they are subject to.

Defining success

### » SURVEY FINDINGS

The most common elitist behaviour is looking down on those who are...

	Elite schools	Non-elite schools
Academically weaker	36%	55%
From non-elite neighbourhood schools	22%	18%
Not able to speak English well	15%	13%
From poorer families	8%	11%
Not good-looking	3%	1%

Which of the following do you think is the most important in helping you to rise to the top of the Singapore system?

	Elite schools	Non-elite schools
Hard work	29%	35%
Talent, whether in business, sports or the arts	27%	22%
Intelligence	18%	15%
Ability to do well	12%	25%
Family wealth	3%	2%
Others	3%	1%

What does success mean to you?



from top schools enjoying the "halo of prestige" they find handed to them, yet resentful of the "intense and sometimes unpleasant competition" they are subject to.

## Defining success

REGARDLESS of the schools they hail from, most young Singaporeans agree that the elite in society are those who are academically able or excel in areas such as sports, music or the arts.

There is also broad agreement that hard work is the most important factor in helping someone rise to the top, followed by talent in areas such as business, sports or the arts.

By contrast, family wealth ranks low on the list of deciding factors.

These responses reflect a healthy level of support for meritocracy and its workings here, a finding the Ministry of Education finds "heartening".

"The Singapore education system is merit-based and affords all students the opportunity to excel, regardless of their family background," it said in an e-mail reply to Insight.

At the same time, the ministry questioned if the sample group of elite-school students was representative.

Of the 121 students from top schools polled, 38 were from a randomly selected sample of young Singaporeans aged 15 to 24. Another 83 responded to an e-mail that was sent out to students from these schools.

MOE said this methodology could cause bias in the survey findings.

It also noted the relatively small sample size and calculated that a 6 to 10 per cent difference between elite and non-elite groups should be considered statistically insignificant.

But Singapore Press Holdings' research department, which conducted the survey, said the more appropriate figure was a gap of more than 8 per cent for the difference to be significant.

## Still a concern?

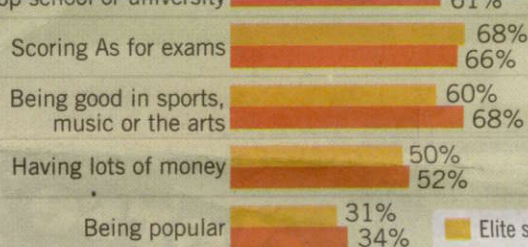
MP FOR Tampines GRC Sin Boon Ann points to one difference between students from elite and those from non-elite schools that was picked up by the survey: their definition of success.

Both groups picked the scoring of As in exams.

But those from non-elite schools are more likely to include achievements in sports and the arts, while those from top schools are more focused on winning places in top universities.

Mr Sin is concerned about the overly narrow definition of success and hopes education policies can be further refined to encourage recognition of a broader range of abilities.

"We are trying to redefine success... we try to allow transferees from, say, Normal to Express stream to ensure the doors



Base: Youngsters aged 15 to 24 in the respective groups

Note: A difference of at least 8 per cent between elite and non-elite responses is needed to conclude that the differences in attitudes are significant.

SOURCE: SPH RESEARCH, ANALYSIS & PLANNING DEPARTMENT

of mobility remain open. But there are still weaknesses in the system," he says.

In its reply to Insight, MOE stressed that the education system is "meritocratic and ability-driven".

It is also moving towards a more flexible and diverse system, to provide students with greater choice to suit their interests and ways of learning. Schools are now able to admit a certain number of students based on non-academic criteria, such as achievements in sports and music, it added.

There is also an emphasis on programmes to inculcate a spirit of service in students, said MOE, citing as one example the 122 community projects launched by Raffles Junior College students last year.

Mr S. Magendiran, senior deputy headmaster of Raffles Institution, says the image of arrogance some elite schools suffer from is partly due to the greater public scrutiny they come under.

"Higher expectations are usually placed on the students of these schools whenever they engage with various sectors of the community," he says.

But the survey finding that caught the attention of NTU sociology professor Eddie Kuo concerns not the students' perceptions of elitism but their actual socio-economic backgrounds.

The survey found that

wealthier students from English-speaking homes tend to cluster in the elite schools.

Some 71 per cent of those from elite schools speak English at home and 62 per cent live in private housing, compared to 34 and 19 per cent respectively of those from non-elite schools.

The first group hail from families with a median household income of \$7,501, while the corresponding figure in the second group was \$3,560.

Prof Kuo said there is a tendency for socio-economic status to be perpetuated over generations.

"I am not saying Singapore society is closed and no inter-generational social mobility is possible," he added.

"What I would like to stress is that more attention and opportunity and resources should be given to the disadvantaged youngsters. This is not only a matter of being fair, but also to fully develop the talents from less advantaged families, so they can contribute to our society to the full of their potentials."

Agreeing, Hong Kah GRC MP and senior counsel Alvin Yeo suggests a greater use of scholarships and bursaries to get a mix of students from different socio-economic backgrounds into the elite schools.

Whatever the proposed solutions, it is clear an increasingly diverse society must learn to manage the potential rifts such diversity can bring.

While measures have been taken to enlarge the buffet of educational choices and recognise a wider range of talents, there is no guarantee that this will lead directly to greater interaction between the classes and inculcate values of empathy in the young.

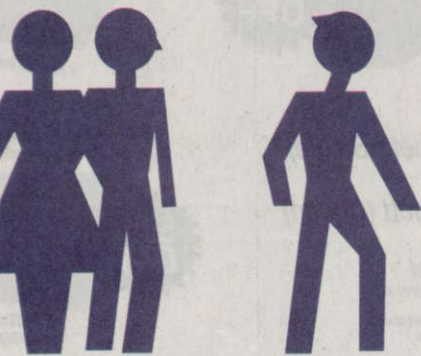
Elitist attitudes are bred from young - in the home and at school - and are likely to outlast a child's school days, say experts.

So it is all the more important to continually review educational policies to nip the problem in the bud.

Parents must also play a role by teaching their children to recognise the varied abilities and qualities of others, and to value each person for who he is.

The survey findings may be largely reassuring. But there is no room to be sanguine over something as important as protecting society's fundamental values of equal opportunity for all and mutual respect among its members.

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