

## Experts call for policies to bridge class divide in Singapore

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If not for his interests in collecting toys and comic books, Mr Jedd Jong, 24, may have found it hard to make friends of a different social class, he reckons.

The film critic and writer came from an elite school and lives in private housing, but counts among his friends many from non-elite schools and those living in Housing Board flats, whom he got to know through his hobbies.

His social network illustrates the findings of an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey released yesterday: On the one hand, people from elite and non-elite schools, and those who live in public and private housing, are not really mixing. But the more they play sports and take part in cultural activities or voluntary groups, the more diverse their networks, the Study On Social Capital In Singapore also found.

"Many of my current friends I met through the cosplay community," said Mr Jong, who thinks it would have been hard to make friends across social groups without the common interests.

The study, which is the first of its kind, has led to some experts cautioning about the emergence of a class divide in Singapore. They called for policies that encourage more mixing along class lines to mitigate this, including tweaking admission policies for primary schools and encouraging more volunteering, including via religious and community organisations, and more sports activities.

National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Vincent Chua, who researches elite school networks, said students from "higher status" backgrounds may tend to have a higher chance of entering elite schools due to better academic performance, for instance.

With schools being one of the places where people get to know peers from different backgrounds, it would not be ideal if top schools became less diverse, added Dr Chua, who worked on the study with NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser and IPS deputy director Gillian Koh.

Pointing to a change in admission rules in 2014, which required all primary schools to set aside 40 places for children with no connections with the school, Dr Chua said this was a move in the right direction.

He suggested expanding the proportion of such places, and also limiting the number of places allotted to children of alumni members.

But Professor Tan said putting different groups together "does not by itself lead to integration".

He suggested activities and projects across schools that would encourage students from different backgrounds to mingle and work together towards a common goal.

The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) said in response to Straits Times queries that it had introduced initiatives to promote mixing across different societal boundaries over the years.

It cited the Outward Bound Singapore camp that all Secondary 3 students will have to go for from 2020, as well as arts and heritage programmes and sports initiatives introduced to foster deeper community bonding and bring people from different backgrounds together.

The SG Cares movement has also helped to forge partnerships across various organisations such as companies, schools and public agencies, strengthening the civic culture and volunteerism, said MCCY.

"MCCY will continue to build social capital by stepping up its community engagement efforts in building a cohesive and caring community," it added.

At the school level, individual schools such as Nanyang Girls High School have also encouraged students to interact with people from all walks of life.

In a statement to The Straits Times, the school said its students get to work, learn and play with students from other schools. They also take part in projects when they are in Secondary 2 in which they engage different communities, such as those with special needs and lower-income families.

But the researchers say the onus is also on individuals to step out of their comfort zones and mix outside their social class.

Dr Koh said: "Our call to action is to mix more without consciousness about status. Hopefully, we find many platforms where status doesn't matter."

Another finding from the study was that those with more diverse networks tend to have stronger feelings of national pride and trust towards people from other races, religions or countries.

Having more friends from different backgrounds broadens people's world view, said the researchers.

"It is in everyday life that we foster these connections, and it is with these connections that you think nationally instead of just within your own group," said Prof Tan.