

# Youth (Leaders) At Risk

By  
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## **Youths at Risk**

Recently, statistics on teenage pregnancies were released. The Malay Muslim community in Singapore was shocked by the huge jump in figures. Indeed, this is just the tip of the iceberg.

This problem of teenage pregnancies forms a greater problem that has recently been termed as the problems of the 'youths at risk'. These include school dropouts, those that join secret societies, drug abusers and so on, among many others.

It can be agreed therefore that since the spectrum of 'youth at risk' is wide, the causes is also therefore many. Hence to understand the many causes, a multifactor analysis must be done.

The problem with having to analyse so many factors is that some factors would tend to be analysed more than some others. If the popularity, that each factor that should be discussed gets, was based on the degree of significance of that factor contributing to the problem, then it is fine and well.

Unfortunately to think that it is so, is not only naïve, but reflects a mind that has a habit of isolating a problem from its many contributors. Like no problem can exist in a vacuum, no choice can be made sterile of the many landscapes that it was made in.

## **Youth Leadership**

Of the many that has not yet been studied is the possibility that leaders, of the many groups attempting to solve the problems of the youth themselves, are contributing to the problems at hand, or at least denying a more efficient solution to the problems. These include the leaders of the Malay-Muslim organizations and those in the mosques, cultural and any other groups.

To study this, we either need to participate in the discussions of and with these leaders or study the activities and programs that they come up with. In fact, it is important to do so as most of these groups use valuable public resources, be it money, space and or time. All in the name of helping youths at risk in the community.

It would also help to study the profile of such youth leaders. Would it be true to say that different profiles seem to volunteer in different forms of activism? Is there stratification within these profiles? Would it be true to say that perhaps those who were or still on government scholarships and degree holders tend to be attracted to a certain club while

those with a different religious orientation congregate to societies and fellowships that believe strongly that religion must play a key role in any solution?

Also, even though we would like to believe that the common thread between these many profiles, is the strong need to better society, if not their own community, we must also understand the reality that there exist opportunities within these activities for political ambition and maneuvering, matrimonial and financial opportunities as well as a easy chance to display some middle class narcissism or on the other side of the spectrum opportunities to console the middle class guilt through an efficient middle class group therapy: the committee.

## **Representations**

Still, from the encounters with such leaders, it is of my humble opinion that these are not major factors that can impede the formulation of a more critical solution to the problems of the 'youths at risk'. The most difficult obstacle is perhaps the simplistic way they understand, imagine and articulate the problem.

These 'youths at risk' are always portrayed as ignorant, problematic, and lethargic. Their addiction to the problems that they are in are often said to have been caused by unloving parents who spend no time with them, family break-ups, bad company and the lack of religious education. There is often no mention of possible economic, political, social and historical factors.

As such, solutions proposed and prescribed are often getting the troubled youths to participate in religious activities, free tuition groups, mentoring schemes and allowing them to socialise with the youths that are not at risks with the hope they are influenced by these 'better' youths and 'imbued' with more desirable qualities. As such, perhaps the youths are now not only victims of undesirable circumstances but also of paternalism of the self-declared rescuers.

Such prescription imposes the choice of the youth leaders onto the 'problematic group'. Often, if not always, such prescription is formulated in the absence of the 'problematic group'. As such, they have nothing to arm themselves with but their own perception of themselves to imagine the reality and depth of the problem.

Unable to imagine a world that is very much different from theirs, these youth leaders consume in their discussions static images and or second hand portrayals of the 'problematic'. Worse is that their prejudices results in a lack of confidence in the 'problematic' the ability to think what they really need and to know what they really want.

The problems can thus be further aggravated when such paternalism is internalised by the 'problematic'. This leads to the very self-depreciation that plagues the 'youth at risk'. The youths are now told, even by the very people that want to liberate them that they are unfit to save themselves. They will therefore be forever dependent on others to think about and change their own lives.

## **The Task Ahead**

Perhaps it is time that a new pedagogy to be thought of in order to better the situation. A pedagogy that is similar to what Freire suggested where, in our case, the 'problematic' is involved in a dialogical process with the leaders to liberate the 'youths at risk' from their own problems.

But for that to happen, we need first to liberate the minds of the youth leaders, the important agents of change, so that they can re-imagine the situations and conditions that gave rise to the 'youth at risk'. Only then can we move more efficiently.

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