Connecting the dots...

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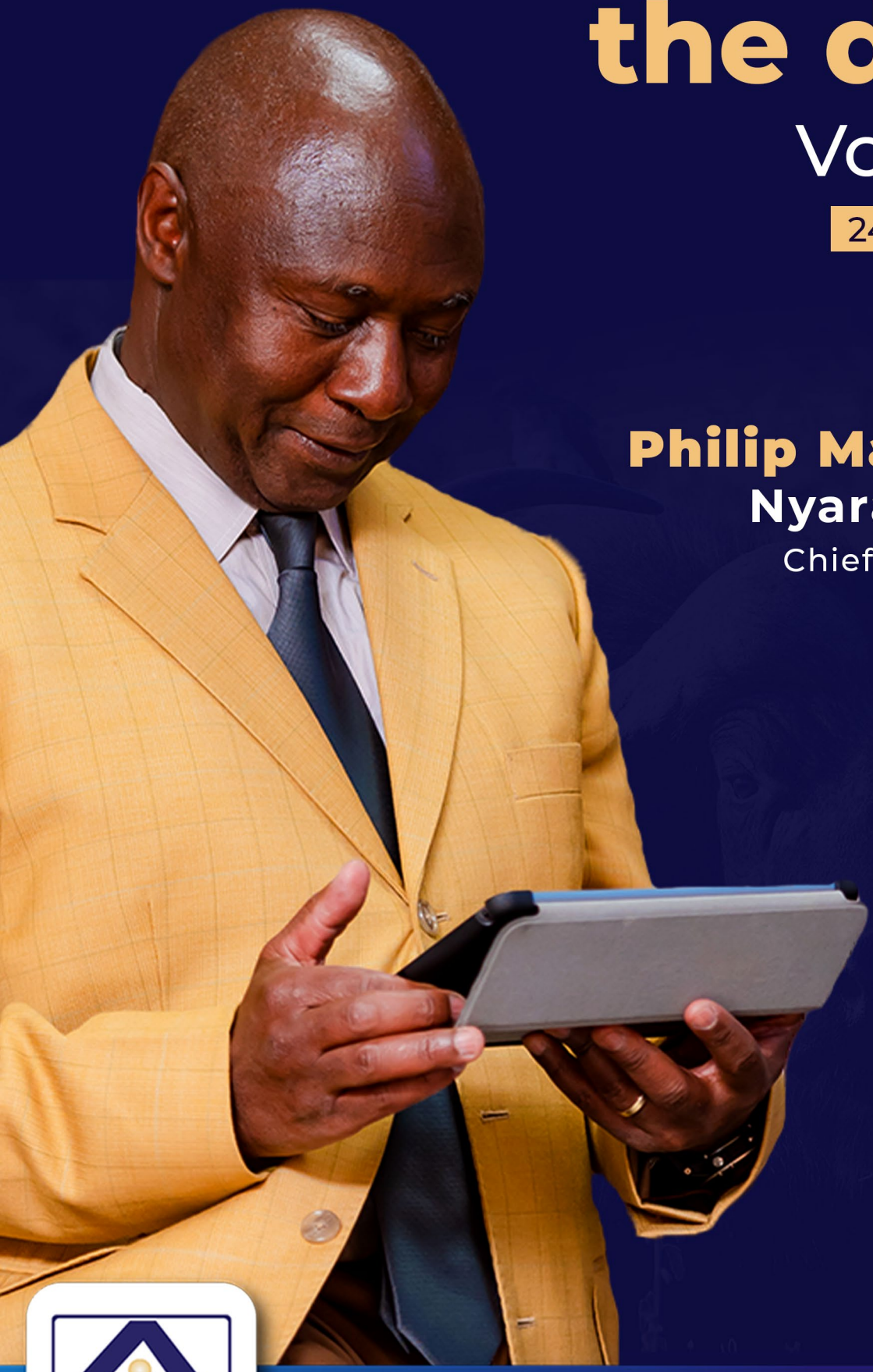

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The best way to predict the future is to shape it!

When my father's candle was blown out on the 31st of August, 1982, I still had one more year to go before sitting for my Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (ZJC) examinations. Having laid him to rest at the family shrine in Rukweza, my focus subsequently shifted towards my studies.

After my contract with John Sisk and Sons had been terminated, it was Father who had come to my rescue – providing me with the funding I needed for my ZJC studies. His untimely passing due to hypertension induced intracranial haemorrhage meant that the funding he had promised to provide me with for the rest of my education dried up immediately, posing a real threat to my dream of writing my own from rags-to-riches story through the transformative power of education.

Once again, the Mataranyika extended family which had been the source of refuge for my siblings and I when the going got tough in earlier years, was a phone call away. With my cap in hand, I had to go back to none other than our dependable uncle, Tongai Mataranyika, to be bailed out. As always, Babamukuru Tongai was gracious enough to oblige, taking over the responsibility of payment of my fees for the remainder of my ZJC studies from where his brother had left off.

Strong-willed and having secured funding, I would swear by my late father that nothing would stand in my way, more so after I had made peace with him following our altercation, which happened a few days before his exit from this cruel world.

Nonetheless, I still had many rivers to cross! Night school was bitter-sweet in the sense that the trip to and from our study group at Nyandoro Primary School in Highfield was like a walk-of-shame as we would come across several people along the streets who did not have any kind words for us. To avoid the humiliation and open hostility that could have easily turned physical, one had to use different routes to get to class, depending on where the drain-hugging crowd were positioned.

There was also the sweet side to our time at Nyandoro Primary School which kept us going in spite of the ridicule from the Ghetto boys who if the truth be told, were mostly weed smoking and substance inhaling. To most of us, the verbal abuse that we endured was the proverbial cross we had to carry to achieve self-dependency and possibly, success.

Beyond education, my mind floated around going all the way to University where I imagined myself graduating as an engineer. In the event I didn't make it all the way to University, I fancied myself becoming at least a motor mechanic, after apprenticeship training. I already saw myself as more than a mere taxi driver, having been let down at Pfumo and Sharaude taxi services where I had hoped to work while building towards launching my own taxi business. I had long seen with my own eyes how a good education catapulted many youths from their humble beginnings to stardom.

Having received father's full blessings, I knew exactly what I wanted in life and that there was no better key to opening doors for the poor and underprivileged than a solid education. Since a good number of the people I went to school with worked by day and attended school by night, I had ample time to study during the day, which was a big advantage for me.

When given assignments, my classmates who were working during the day would struggle to submit them in time, having to juggle between work and school, However, I did not have this challenge, and would take my sweet time to complete my assignments, revising my work and ensuring I was up-to-date with the syllabus.

At school, my peers would fall over each other to be assisted with their studies and I would use them as guinea pigs to test my understanding of the subjects and work on those areas that needed improvement. It also helped that we had many good teachers at Nyandoro Primary School, most of whom were graduates from the University of Zimbabwe (UZ). Among the teachers who taught and prepared us well for our examinations was a young UZ graduate, Tedious Tafirenyika Chifamba, who was so good at his craft – teaching us the Queen's language.

We got to know that Ted and a number of our other graduate teachers had taken up the chalk and blackboard as a past-time whilst they awaited opportunities in industry and commerce where learned young black men and women were working their way up into positions that were previously a preserve for whites. For their efforts, these university graduates were taking home jaw-dropping salaries and had other perks such as company cars and houses in some of Harare's leafy suburbs.

Ted eventually left for greener pastures, rising through the ranks to become one of the finest bureaucrats Zimbabwe has ever produced. In time, he would break into diplomacy, starting off as deputy ambassador or deputy permanent representative to the Permanent Mission of Zimbabwe to the United Nations and the World Trade Organization at Geneva in Switzerland, from 1994 to 2001. His vast experience in bilateral, regional and multilateral negotiations led him to being appointed the coordinator and spokesperson of the African Group of Trade Negotiators in the World Trade Organization, a position he served from 1999 to 2001.

Ted was appointent Divisional Head of Multilateral Affairs for Africa, Asia and the Pacific in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2002 to 2007 and from 2007 to 2009, respectively, following which in 2011, he was elected Chief Negotiator for Eastern and Southern Africa for the negotiation of the Economic Partnership Agreements with the European Union. A holder of a BSc Politics and Administration (Hons) degree as well as an MSc International Relations degree from the UZ, Ted is one of UZ's prominent alumni who had such a huge influence on me. I am still in contact with him even as he is now Zimbabwe's ambassador to the United States of America with the onerous responsibility of building bridges between Harare and the world's most powerful economy.

Another of our teachers was Mr Zvigumbu who taught us history. Having these well-polished and articulate gentlemen as our teachers at Nyandoro Primary School, rekindled the admiration I had for university graduates, an obsession I developed while working as a builder's assistant at John Sisk and Son in 1982 when we were building the Maths and Computers Department at UZ. I flourished under their tutelage, becoming one of their best students – a far cry from the lacklustre performance I had shown in my Grade Seven examinations in the 1977 exams, failing them miserably.

Towards the end of my Junior Certificate studies, I started thinking about how best I could guarantee my success at Ordinary "O" Level seeing that almost all of our teachers at Nyandoro were university graduates who had taken up teaching as a past-time while awaiting work opportunities to open up.

It was therefore unlikely that we would have the same teachers for our "O" Levels, which meant that continuity could never be guaranteed. Given that "O" level came with more subjects than ZJC, I became concerned about passing my "O" Levels with good grades in order to stand a good chance of progressing to "A" Level.

At the time, an "O" Level pass of at least five subjects at Grade C or better determined entry into Advanced "A" Level or entry into college for diploma courses or university for adult entry degree programmes. Even back then for one to qualify for some courses, it was a requirement that their five "O" Level passes be in one sitting.

It was at this point, that I came to the conclusion that continuing with night school was going to present me with problems and I had to make another big decision regarding my education – switching from non-formal to formal education. It didn't require rocket science to reach that conclusion.

Whilst I had ample time to study by day and attend school by night, many of my fellow students did not have the same luxury to do their assignments or homework, which meant that we could not move fast enough on the syllabus. Given the slow speed with which we were tackling the Junior Certificate studies, I imagined the time it was going to take us to get through the "O" Level syllabus, and decided I needed to look for a school and apply for a place so that I would go back to formal education.

Because the average age of a first year "O" Level student was sixteen whilst I was turning a whole twenty years in 1984, I decided that the only place I stood a better chance of enrolling at a day school was in the village where there were a few other older students like me, unlike in urban centres.

At independence in 1980, the government decided to expand the net on education, allowing all and sundry to go back to school. At the village in Rukweza, a new secondary school had been built, with the construction contract having been given to a local, Mr Madanhi of Madanhi Builders and Contractors.

I therefore fancied my chances of getting a place for my "O" Levels at the local village secondary school, but I first needed to be granted authority to switch from non-formal education (NFE) to formal education. How I was going to do this was the big question!

Back in the day, our education system was clearly divided between Non-Formal Education, (NFE) and Formal Education, (FE) with dedicated officers tasked to deal with the administration of these two departments right up to education officer level. Having swept into power through the first democratic elections that ushered in independence in 1980, the majority government inherited an imbalanced, racially-biased education system that needed a major overhaul.

Prior to independence, the colonial regime was not concerned about quality education for the black majority. Although whites comprised only five percent of the populace, they received the bulk of the educational budget. As a result, the exclusive minority occupied most of the civil service, administrative and managerial posts for which their government ensured they were well qualified.

To the contrary, blacks were expected to be just literate at an elementary level so they would easily receive instructions from their masters and do the basics in terms of administrative work. Education for blacks was, therefore, not a priority, though various missionaries did a good job educating Africans who the system regarded as a cheap source of labour.

In 1980, education was declared a basic human right, with the new government going a step further to make primary and secondary education free and compulsory. That education became a fundamental human right, was clearly articulated in the Education Act of 1987. Tied to this was a deliberate policy to provide opportunities for those previously disadvantaged to take up both primary and secondary education through adult literacy.

During the war, many people had dropped out of school and there were not many secondary schools in the country. The black government that came to power in 1980, took it upon themselves to invest heavily in education, allocating a large portion of government expenditure to education.

The new government of Prime Minister Robert Mugabe thus sought to achieve equality through education as they saw it as a universal equaliser. The new administration immediately adopted a human capital development model that sought to leave no one behind in acquiring an education, basing its philosophy on Marxist-Leninist socialist policies. The hallmark of this expansionist and socialist policy was free education for all, which saw an unprecedented growth in the stock of primary and secondary schools.

For those who could not go back to formal education for whatever reason, NFE and adult literacy programmes were introduced to provide alternative pathways and to widen access to education for various categories of learners such as young people and adults who had never attended or had dropped out of school.

Some of the students who were absorbed into the system came from the formal education system after failing to get the required number of five "O" Level passes or minimum of two "A" Level subjects for entry into the job market or into university. Others were candidates who due to employment and family obligations could not go to formal education.

NFE provided a higher degree of flexibility for learners who wanted to acquire various competencies and life skills outside the formal school system. Supervised study groups were also established with the purpose of making education accessible to young and mature people whose study opportunities had been destabilized by the war.

At the centre of driving this agenda were private colleges, also known as independent schools or non-state schools, which were not administered by local government authorities or national state government. As such, they retained the right to select their students, run their operations independently and were funded in whole or in part by tuition fees, rather than relying on mandatory taxation through public funding.

They were, however, not a new phenomenon in Zimbabwe, with the history of distance and open learning education having been in existence from as far back as the 1930s when correspondence educational enterprises helped the marginalised African majority who were eager to pursue their studies despite having been pushed out of the formal system by the colonial discriminatory policies of the white racist administration.

Among some of the institutions that claim a long history in the provision of distance and non-formal education is the Government Primary Correspondence School (GPCS), which began as an experiment sponsored by the Education Department in 1930. GPCS was the brainchild of a Mr Tait, an Australian who had visited Zimbabwe on an educational commission. He suggested a Correspondence School as a means of meeting the needs of outside (rural) pupils who were either too young or whose parents were not able financially to place their children in day or boarding schools.

Another non-formal education programme was run by the Rapid Results College (RRC), in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture. RRC was established in Zimbabwe in 1981 although it had been in the game from as far back as 1955. The Central Africa Correspondence College (CACC), Ranche House College and the People's College also came into the mix, offering academic programmes as well as professional courses such as bookkeeping, salesmanship, office practice and secretarial. These colleges were established and owned by white proprietors, as business entities. CCAC was one of the most established distance education centres to operate in Rhodesia, having been formed and registered in December 1953 before opening its doors to learners in 1954.

The International Correspondence School (ICS) was also established in 1953. It had been founded in the United States, way back in 1889. Today, its students are based in more than one hundred countries. Speciss College was another household name that offered NFE, having started operating in 1958. The modern era saw the establishment of private colleges, wholly-owned and run by indigenous Zimbabweans, the majority of them former education ministry employees with some of them being business people who partner with educationists. Dr Sikhanyiso Duke and his wife Dr Rose Ndlovu were pioneers in the founding of private colleges by indigenous Zimbabweans through their Zimbabwe Distance Education College (ZDECO), which they established in 1980.

Then came Herentals College, Ezekiel Guti College, B & P College, PACE College, People's College, Trust Academy, Maranatha and a wide range of other indigenous-owned private educational enterprises that are in existence nationwide.

On the whole, correspondence or distance education colleges have made a considerable contribution to Zimbabwe's education over the years, with an estimation of over a million students having received correspondence education in one form or another. I am happy to have been one of those who benefited from it.

Back then, it was a requirement of study that we had to submit results of every assignment we got at school to the CACC administrative offices on Harare Drive in town so they could assess readiness for examinations. I had, therefore, religiously submitted all my mark orders up to the time I was thinking of jumping ship to formal education. Whenever we were given assignments, I did them well, getting good grades in every subject in the process. That consistency eventually paid off.

After consulting widely once my mind to become a day scholar was made, I was advised to get my progress report from the administrative office and to take it to the education officer (non-formal) so I could get a recommendation letter that I would take to a secondary school of my choice. I did as I was told, getting a copy of my progress report to Chester House on Speke Avenue, which housed the offices for the Ministry of Education. There, I was ushered into the office of the education officer (non-formal), Mr E Njagu who was gracious enough to receive me. After explaining my story to Mr Njagu, he expressed admiration for the position I was taking and was impressed with my progress reports. Without wasting any time, he put pen to paper, writing the recommendation letter I needed to take to Rukweza Secondary School so I could be admitted into formal education.

Armed with that all important recommendation letter, I immediately hit the ground running to the village so I could enrol at Rukweza Secondary School to continue on my education journey. The pieces of my future shaping jigsaw puzzle were slowly finding their place.