Connecting the dots...

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From dusk learning, to a new dawn...

On the morning of the commencement of the first school term in January 1984, I arrived at Rukweza Secondary School, with everything I thought I needed to start a new life as a Form Three student after years of being out of the formal school system.

Located in Rukweza Village, about four kilometres from my rural homestead, under a village head of the same name, Rukweza Secondary School is one of the many schools that was established at independence by the Government of then Prime Minister Robert Gabriel Mugabe.

I was nineteen at the time, and two months short of my twentieth birthday, which meant I was about four years late in enrolling for my Form Three. It had also been seven years since I had left formal school at Farai Primary School in Chitungwiza, closing that chapter with a poor performance that I wished I could quickly forget, coming as it did, at a time when the family's financial situation was in dire straits.

Father had lost his job at the Harare United Omnibus Company where he had worked as a driver, while Mother was having challenges with her catering business after her niche clientele at John Sisk and Son had been condemned to the streets by a staff rationalisation programme that followed a general slow-down in construction activities in the late 1970s.

So underwhelming was my performance in my Grade Seven examinations that there were better chances of a snowball surviving in hell than securing a place in Form One at any of the competitive schools in Chitungwiza or elsewhere.

Even if a vocational training centre such as St Peter's Kubatana in Highfield had offered me a place, the funding required was unavailable. In its heyday, St Peter's had become the cornerstone upon which thousands of underprivileged youths learnt life-changing vocational skills that cut across plumbing, bricklaying, carpentry, metalwork and painting among others, resulting in them eventually building successful careers as tradesmen.

Ironically St Peter's was founded by a Briton, Father Ted Rogers, in the same year that I was born; 1964. Born in the United Kingdom in 1924, Father Rogers had trained as a Jesuit priest after being demobilised from the navy, leading to his posting to Rhodesia, where he first landed a job as headmaster at St Paul's Mission in Musami. In the years that followed, he moved to St Peter's – one of the first Catholic Churches in Salisbury – where he founded a desperately needed tertiary training centre that started off with the objective of tackling social problems that were building up in the so-called ghettos, as restless youngsters therein had nothing better to do other than cause trouble. The St Peter's Kubatana Community was recently plunged in mourning when Father Rogers died at the ripe age of ninety-four. May his dear soul rest in eternal peace.

When I finally decided to go back to formal education, I had done a number of things for a living, all of which had served to buttress my conviction that education was the sure-fire way out of poverty. My proudest moment when I walked the four kilometre journey that morning from my home to Rukweza Secondary School, had been the decision I had taken to register with the Central African Correspondence College (CACC) before joining a study group at Nyandoro Primary School in Highfield. As night school students, we were a privileged lot, to have been taught by brilliant University Graduate teachers such as Ted Chifamba, Mr Zvigumbu and others. Through their assistance, I had passed my Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (ZJC) with flying colours – thereby atoning for my lacklustre performance at primary school.

Now armed with my outstanding ZJC, I had envisioned myself becoming anything I wanted to be. At the top of my job wish list would be to become a temporary teacher, majoring in Mathematics, English or History. I had also passed Bookkeeping with a distinction, which made me feel comfortable with the possibility of teaching any or all of the five subjects that we had done at ZJC level, including Shona.

One of the missions for the newly-elected government which emerged from Rhodesia's first democratic elections held in February 1980 was to make education available for all. With this in mind, many new schools were opened throughout the country; especially in rural areas where the biggest constraint became the non-availability of manpower, hence even with a ZJC one could be employed as a teacher.

A combination of inadequate infrastructure such as poor road networks, lack of running water and electricity as well as poor working conditions in general, had also conspired to make it doubly difficult to motivate and retain qualified teachers in rural and farm schools. This had inadvertently widened opportunities for holders of Junior Certificates who stood no chance of getting placements in urban areas where competition for such openings was stiff amongst university and teachers college graduates as well as those with "O" and "A" Level certificates.

Still inspired by university students that I had been lucky enough to rub shoulders with while still in the employ of John Sisk and Son as well as through our study group in Highfield where firebrand graduates from the University of Zimbabwe challenged us to dream big, I now wanted more! Having gone back to school at Nyandoro Primary School where I had hit top form as a student, I had gone on to invest a lot of time and effort to enhance my chances of being admitted into formal education – sailing through my ZJC examinations.

Furthermore, I had shuttled from one government office to another to get all the documentation I needed to make the transition from non-formal education (NFE) to formal education (FE) possible – culminating in the issuance of the letter of support by Mr Njagu – who was an education officer with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education.

With all my ducks seemingly in a row, I counselled myself against scouting for an opening as a temporary teacher when I could instead go all the way to reach my full potential and become anything I wanted to be.

Turning the page from NFE to FE became the missing piece of the puzzle. It was for this reason that I had absolutely nothing else in mind but to get on with a new life as a formal student upon my arrival at Rukweza Secondary School on that morning of the first school term in January 1984.

Before that maiden trip to the school's administration offices, I had been to my uncle, Gibson Mataranyika's house in the same village to seek his assistance in securing me the form three place at the secondary school. Being the headmaster for the junior school, I was convinced that Babamunini Gibson could help pave the way for me before I faced his counterpart at the senior school.

Having spent years out of formal school, being over-aged and having attained my ZJC through correspondence, I knew that the odds were heavily stacked against me. The worst case scenario was that Mr Mahaja, who was the headmaster at Rukweza Secondary School, would be reluctant to offer me the Form Three place, presuming I would cause him lots of problems as had been the case with other over-age students who had made the school yard their favourite hunting ground for marriage partners rather than one for seeking knowledge and self-advancement.

Babamunini Gibson made it abundantly clear to me that while he would intercede on my behalf, it was not his responsibility to allocate me a place, since his mandate was only that of running the primary school. In other words, the buck stopped with the headmaster for the secondary school, Mr Mahaja! Notwithstanding, I was still hopeful that Babamunini Gibson's word was weighted in gold and that touch wood, I had a good chance of getting a place given my solid progress report, the excellent grades that I had achieved in my ZJC as well as the letter of support from Mr Njagu.

Before my make-or-break meeting with Mr Mahaja, I went out of my way to look sharp in my new school uniform and to make sure that every word that came out of my mouth was carefully selected to win over. Maikuru Mai Chipo, wife to my uncle Tongai Mataranyika, had also done her part in preparing me for the occasion, spending all she had, buying me a grey shirt, maroon tie and grey socks which was the school uniform for boys at Rukweza Secondary School. Without a pair of shorts and black shoes, the school uniform would not have been complete. Because the money Maikuru Mai Chipo had was enough only to buy me a shirt, tie and socks, I also tried to make her life easier by improvising on what I already had. I had a worn out brown pair of shoes that had made many visits to the shoe-maker, which I converted to black by repeatedly applying black polish until they looked like school shoes. I was pleased looking at myself in the mirror, all dressed up and looking like a real high school student.

Feeling excited and anxious at the same time, I presented myself at Rukweza Secondary School that morning appropriately dressed. I was ushered into the headmaster's waiting room where I was told to cool my feet until Mr Mahaja had finished dealing with the administrative issues associated with the beginning of the new term and a new school year. I waited patiently for him to dispense with his business before he could attend to me.

A very strict man whose posture was more like that of an army commander than that of an educationist, Mr Mahaja was an orderly and assertive man and one could literally feel his authority as he walked – pacing himself with measured steps.

When the time came for me to be invited into his office, Mr Mahaja was gracious enough to listen attentively and patiently as I poured my heart out, pleading with him for an opportunity to proceed with my education in a formal setting. Despite his intimidating stature, he turned out to be a good listener. He was also good at using non-verbal communication to urge his visitors to open up, including nodding his head each time words were spoken – a gesture that indicated, "carry on, I am listening." Knowing how other over-age students had misbehaved and squandered the goodwill that had been reposed on them by the school authorities, I pleaded my case to be treated differently.

Mr Mahaja's response would leave me on tenterhooks, not knowing whether I was in or out. He had responded by saying that there were no Form Three places available as he expected all his Form Two students from the previous year to proceed to do their "O" Levels. As such, he didn't see how he would be able to accommodate me in the event that all of them came back and also given that all his prior Form Two year classes were full to the brim.

Just as my face fell in disappointment, Mr Mahaja threw in a glimmer of hope, suggesting that I should come back after two weeks to check if there was any opening brought about by either a transfer by a student to a different school or a drop out for whatever reason. I appreciated the fact that in terms of the rules and regulations that existed at the time the school had to wait for a mandatory period of two weeks in the event of an unexplained absence before they could declare the position vacant.

Vacancies at schools arose from different scenarios. For instance, when a family moved to a different location and distance forced them to move their children to schools closer or a family ran out of money midway through their children's education, after selling almost all they had in assets, including cattle and goats, forcing their children out of school.

Girl children were the worst affected, whereby a pregnancy would result in immediate expulsion, even though the boy responsible for the pregnancy would be spared. Teachers would retort that they would not countenance teaching mothers who were trying to juggle between their competing responsibilities at home and school, which should have applied to the boys as well. A good number of pregnancy-related dropouts were a result of truancy as the affected girl child simply stopped coming to school knowing that she would be shamed and expelled if she was discovered to be pregnant. After giving birth, private schools were an alternative, but only available to those who could afford the steep fees, leaving vocational schools as the only realistic alternative for those who wanted to pursue education after childbearing.

Significantly and in practice, there were rarely any repercussions for the boys or men who impregnated female students who had not reached the legal age of consent, despite laws that make it clear that such individuals should be held criminally liable. At most, male students or teachers who would have caused the pregnancy were forced to transfer to a different school and once outside the school system their lives returned to normal without any serious consequences.

Officials and teachers offered various justifications for the expulsion and exclusion practices that were discriminatory against the girl child. Some viewed the practice as purely punitive since expulsion was about punishing premarital sexual activity, whereas authorities felt the girls who fell pregnant, did it on purpose and should be sent packing so that they didn't encourage others — particularly female students, from having premarital sex.

Therefore expulsion was regarded as avoiding the so-called contamination or corruption of other female students. But once condemned out of school, there was stigma and shame associated with adolescent pregnancy, with the traumatic effects of that stigma from classmates, teachers and communities contributing to health complications such as maternal deaths.

It was just as well that justice prevailed when the government amended the country's Education Act in August 2010, making it illegal to expel pregnant girls from school, having realised the truism behind the old African proverb that says, "if you educate a boy you educate an individual, if you educate a girl you educate a whole village."

Globally, it is estimated that sixteen million teenage girls give birth each year with ninety-five percent of births emanating from developing countries. In fact, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), pregnancy related complications are the second main cause of deaths amongst teenage mothers aged between fifteen and nineteen years, globally.

In Zimbabwe, the problem of unplanned teenage pregnancies is reportedly more prevalent in rural areas than in urban areas as evidenced in a survey by the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency in 2014 which revealed that about twenty-nine percent of rural women had begun childbearing as teenagers compared to their urban counterparts at about fourteen percent.

Of these rural teenage pregnancies, Marange area located in Mutare rural contributed a significant number to these national statistics. Allowing pregnant girls to remain in school is therefore one of the greatest reforms the education sector has had that contributes to empowerment of the girl child even though most girls are still too embarrassed to show up in class with their growing belly.

After I was advised by Mr Mahaja to return home and come back in two weeks' time after which he would be in a position to know if there was a vacant place, the fortnight of waiting that followed was the longest of my life up to that moment.

I also wished that if a place did become available, it was on account of a family transfer to a different location, or transfer to a perceived better school, rather than a student dropping out for reasons associated with lack of resources or a girl child dropping out due to a teenage pregnancy. It had not been lost on me that often it was a result of the girl child being impregnated by a boy child who carried on with school like nothing had happened. I was therefore uncomfortable with a vacancy that would arise as a result of one's education journey being cut short due to either of the two, having been down a similar road myself, when my father threatened me with withdrawal of funding for everything, including my education, after I had refused to go and look after his cattle in the village. I knew how it felt being on the other side.

Not wanting to miss out on study time and play catch-up once I was admitted into formal school, I was glad that Maikuru Mai Chipo was gracious enough to leave me out of the family plans for fieldwork which helped me keep pace with those who were attending classes, especially as it was in January when fieldwork would be at its peak. Given the pass, I would wake up early in the morning as if I was going to school and spend the day reading Ordinary Level books that I had been given by my cousin, Amos Matara-nyika, who had finished writing his "O" Levels a few years earlier. Just as I had done whilst studying for my Junior Certificate Exams, I put together a timetable that I adhered to strictly, even before I had a confirmed place to proceed with my formal education. I had some confidence that after the two weeks of waiting, my chance would come.

Studying through correspondence had toughened me and taught me self-discipline to help structure my study habits so that I could efficiently allocate time to study without supervision. I also took the two-week waiting period to prepare myself physiologically for the move from dusk learning to a new dawn, seeing as the transition from NFE to FE as well as shifting base from urban to rural was to come with its own pain points.

There I was, back in the village where I had committed myself to walking the almost four kilometre stretch from home to Rukweza Secondary School in the company of other students from our village and many others from places further afield such as Mutungwazi, Nero and Nyazura. In that group, I knew I would turn heads because stories had been doing the rounds that I was working in Harare and that other than visiting the village during public holidays, I no longer had any business to do there.

As might be expected, I assumed as much that my childhood friends in Rukweza would be surprised to see me back in the village, and would definitely judge me for attending a school in their backyard as if there were no formal schools in Harare. But all this mattered little to me; all I cared about was for the two-week window to lapse and hopefully get the much-needed opportunity to study, get good "O" Level grades and be on my way to a better life.