Connecting the dots...

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Building a firewall for peak performance...

My strong performance in the Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (ZJC) level exams was indicative of my capabilities at "O" Level if I continued to work as hard, more so now that I had switched to formal education, which was more structured and systematic than the long distance learning that I had been used to.

The two years I had spent doing night school at Nyandoro Primary School in Highfield became an added advantage once I was accepted for a Form Three place at Rukweza Secondary School. They had built in me a sense of self-motivation, self-dependence, self-confidence and a spirit of hard work, which was the tonic I needed to lay the groundwork for my imagined success in life.

At my new school, only I could let myself down. The time allocated for learning was a lot more than what we had at our study group at Nyandoro where the lesson time was at best three hours. At formal school, we had lessons lasting pretty much the whole day. I knew even back then that it was not only quantity that determined results; quality mattered as well. In that regard, I needed to put my best foot forward, allocating plenty of time to study long after lessons, so I could pass my "O" Levels with grades that would set me on an irreversible path to achieving my dreams.

Unlike at our study group in the ghetto where my peers had to juggle between school at night and work during the day, which resulted in them scraping through school, there were bright boys and girls at Rukweza Secondary School. I was, however, not intimidated. If anything, I saw it as an opportunity to showcase my new found confidence as well as my determination to achieve the results I thought I was cappable of.

I also saw it as an opportunity for me to hone my social interaction skills, blending with a bigger flock and perfecting my ability to arrange my work and life schedules in an orderly manner as I prepared for life after school. The presence of school authorities was the icing on the cake as they would breathe down our necks, encouraging us to go that extra mile whilst at the same time doing their best to snuff out the slightest whiff of delinquent behaviour before it could get out of hand.

While it was precisely for these and other reasons that I decided to go back to formal education, I was under no illusion that I would have it my way all the way. Aged twenty and enrolled in an institution where most students were between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, I knew I needed to adjust to fit in.

I needed to be brave to overcome the temptations often associated with young adults of that age. The most significant moral hazard was that I could lose focus and start to chase after those of the fairer sex, at the risk of excelling between the sheets instead of staying true to my goals and objectives of pursuing education.

At that age, the hormones would be starting to wreak havoc, more so in an institution where there were plenty of pretty girls, some of whom would have been happy to play if invited to.

I wasn't alone in this dilemma. It was not uncommon in the early 1980s to find older students in the same classroom with much younger classmates as the armed struggle had forced families to flee from their war-torn villages and schools in rural areas to close. The education-for-all policy that had been adopted by the new administration of then Prime Minister Robert Gabriel Mugabe had consequently opened the floodgates to all-and-sundry. It was to that extent, that the first class that enrolled for Form One in 1981, which included some of the former liberation war fighters and war collaborators were sitting for their "O" Levels in 1984.

Most classes in schools, especially in rural areas, were made up of a mixture of young and older students. It was even worse in farm schools where some learners would miss lessons to work for provisions such as food, school uniforms and books. Most students of my age had already moved into adult roles and responsibilities, learnt a trade or worked formally or informally before electing to pursue their studies, of which I was one of them.

Once back in school, over-aged girls and boys were now conscious of their sexuality and concerned with getting into serious, emotional and intimate relationships. Generally, educationists were lenient and careful when dealing with over-aged students, some of whom had absolutely no qualms with settling real or imagined scores outside of the schoolyard, damn the consequences.

Having reached the legal age of majority, it was safer for most teachers to presume that the over-aged students could understand abstract concepts, consequences to their actions, as well as take individual responsibility, which was not always the case.

Due to the large number of schools that opened during the early years of Zimbabwe's independence, most schools were filled with very young teachers, resulting in some of the delinquent over-aged students literally getting away with murder. To cope with the heavy demand for teachers, most of the teacher training was on the job, with training institutions resorting to recruiting school leavers who, when faced with tricky situations that could easily boil over, would opt for collaboration instead of confrontation.

While some people my age were already teaching or pursuing other career opportunities, there I was at Rukweza Secondary School, still to complete my "O" Levels and depending on the generosity of my uncle, Tongai Mataranyika and his loving wife, Laina, for basics such as food, shelter, and my school fees. Instead of pursuing their studies, when given the opportunity, some of my fellow over-aged students had gone on to start families, much to the chagrin of the school authorities who felt betrayed by their duplicity and deceit. Having promised the school headmaster, Mr Mahaja that I would be different from such characters, – I was determined to deliver on my pledge.

Knowing it was easier said than done, I reasoned I needed to build a firewall around me to tame the marauding hormones driven by my biological clock that loomed large as the biggest threat towards keeping the promise I had made to Mr Mahaja. In the words of prominent American TV host, Oprah Winfrey, I had to surround myself "with those who only lift you higher", always mindful that bad company corrupts good character.

Whereas at Mbare Musika I had joined a tribe of men who helped and guided me into manhood, teaching me life skills such as welding and fixing cars, I had to find another tribe – this time, of boys and girls who were determined to live a life of sacrifice and delayed gratification to remain focused. I found that refuge in the United Methodist Church Youth Fellowship (UMYF), where I became president of Rukweza Youth Fellowship in 1984, deputised by Monica Chibayambuya, who was a year ahead of me at Rukweza Secondary School and our Head girl.

My executive consisted of the secretary, publicity secretary, treasurer, finance and project chairpersons. We were supported by advisors, under the guidance of our circuit pastor who as per constitution were ex-officio members. Our responsibilities were clearly spelt out in the youth organ's charter, which seeks to shape members of the UMYF to share the abundant life of Jesus Christ with a view to know and to do what He desires through evangelism, education, healing, recreation, community services and world friendship.

Discipline had long been an integral part of the UMYF, which expects its members to be loyal to the church and uphold their faith through prayers, presence, gifts and service. Breaching any of the UMYF rules was met with stiff penalties that included suspension of confirmation rights, revocation of the privilege of leadership, or any other disciplinary actions as may be found fit. Being a member of the UMYF, therefore, demanded that I observe the strict life of being the light in the darkness and ultimately, follow Jesus Christ. Remaining disciplined and keeping the UMYF spirit alive became my mission, and, along with my studies, it consumed any idle time that I could have abused to get into trouble.

As president of Rukweza Youth Fellowship, it was my responsibility to preside over all executive and general meetings; sit at all finance and project meetings; supervise executive members with the help of advisors, lay leaders, and the church pastor; attending church council meetings; keeping the pastor and youth advisors informed of all UMYF activities and representing my executive wherever and whenever I was required.

I would also convene meetings of the Youth Fellowship executive to administer all affairs of the organ; prepare reports for the church council and UMYF general meetings; prepare annual budgets and present them to the general meetings; maintain discipline within the UMYF and church; process reports of the finance and projects committees and initiating new programmes, amongst other things. Along with my executive, we became strong in spirit and resolute in living clean lives according to the UMYF principles, which extolled the virtues of following Jesus Christ's example; giving total loyalty and service to Christ through the church; working for Christ and mankind; upholding the ideals of unselfish service; placing the welfare of others before our own; striving continually for human betterment; upholding Jesus as our Saviour and Lord and maintaining and upholding the discipline of the UMC.

I quickly surrounded myself with like-minded boys and girls who valued the importance of lifting each other up, guided by the wisdom that a chain is as strong as its weakest link. I developed a close relationship with Cephas Mukwawaya, who not only became my class and study mate; but eventually my best friend and prayer partner. Other members of our group included Monica Chibayambuya and her sister Eva, Inga Rukweza; her sister Oripah; Charity Chiwaye; the Kamutondore boys, Charles and Ernest, Naomi Mambondiyani, the Matsokotere girls, Emma, Dorcas and Tambu and a couple of others.

Looking back at my tenure as leader of Rukweza Youth Fellowship, it was such an honour and privilege to have led a group of principled boys and girls who were focused and supportive. With the UMYF open to ages twelve to thirty years, it was a source of pride to wear the red, white and silver badge, more so given the UMYF's long and rich history, dating as far back as May 1889 when the Epworth league of the Methodist Episcopal Church was founded at Central Methodist (now Epworth-Euclid Methodist Church) in Cleveland. In turn, the Epworth League was a merger of five pioneering youth organisations that had begun their work as early as 1877. In 1889, a group of young people's societies in Methodist Episcopal Church South was organised into a cooperation union.

The Methodist Youth fellowship was formally instituted in the watch night services in December 1941, representing the majority of the groups from the Methodist Protestant Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church South and the Methodist Church. These three churches were united at the conference of 1939 at Kansas City in the state of Missouri.

At the time of the unification of the three churches, the general conference of the Methodist Church tasked the general Board of Education with bringing together the youth work of the church into a unified programme for the youths of the Methodist Church. To accomplish this, the Board of Education set up a youth commission to conduct a careful study and make recommendations for this programme. After months of on-taking-work, consultations by staff with youth groups and leaders throughout the nation emerged, a nationwide meeting of youth and a church-wide pool of movement called the United Methodist Youth Fellowship (UMYF) to meet the needs of a new generation of youths in every community in America.

The Methodist Youth Fellowship was accepted as an official youth organisation under the Board of Education according to the discipline of the ninth session of Rhodesia Annual Conference of the Methodist Church in 1947, held at Old Mutare, Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) between August and September of the same year.

The first Youth president was Richard Chikosi, with one Q.C Roberts Jr coming in as the first youth counsellor.

Fast forward to 1984, we quickly formed a group of church mates who were committed to maintaining their chastity and living their lives in accordance with Jesus' teachings, having been elected into the UMYF executive. Monica was our pillar of strength and our moral compass, always urging us to be upright and pray. Our pastor in charge was Reverend Kabungaidze, while our mother advisor was Mrs Murahwa, wife of Norman and our lay leader was Mr Mordecai Kaisi.

We made it a point to pray for our studies, lives, families and vowed to live a life guided by strict Christian principles. This became my sanctuary, my shield so I could remain focused. Starting on a high at Rukweza Secondary School and becoming a favourite of the teachers, I sought to become a counterweight to the top Form Three students who had dominated the top three positions from Form One. They were Christopher Haadivamwe, Trueness Matamisa and Never Mpembera.

To pull my weight, I would burn the midnight oil as time flew by quickly and before long, it was the end of the first term. When we opened for the second term, word started making rounds that the school was about to have us write mid-year exams in order to be screened according to our academic abilities.

Soon, it became official as Mr Mahaja made the announcement at assembly that the non-exam classes would be subjected to a mid-year exam to screen students according to performance. He said teachers were struggling to cope, teaching a mixed bag of students whose varying absorption rates were getting in the way of completing the syllabus on time.

By screening classes, Mr Mahaja said the teachers would move faster with the syllabus and prepare students better for national exams in Form Two and Form four. The mid-year exams for Form Two and Four were about giving teachers an indication of how they would perform in the end of year national exams.

Mr Mahaja was also of the view that screening classes would be helpful to those who were not so quick in grasping concepts. The teachers would be able to spend more time with those who needed special attention, he said, while helping them at their pace to understand so they could also be ready come national exam time.

The practice of screening students had been popularised in the United States of America (USA) in the late 1800s before it spread like veldt fire across the globe. In the USA, the practice is popularly referred to as 'ability grouping' or "homogeneous grouping" and it is based on the assumption that children of the same talents learn better when they are grouped together.

This system has since been adopted by many educators around the world, including in Zimbabwe, although some studies have shown that this is probably not the best approach as several other considerations should be taken into account.

One of the major advantages of screening students is that when learners of similar abilities are grouped together, a teacher can customise their work and method of instruction. This obviously reduces the workload for the teacher, knowing exactly what the learners need and how to deliver the lesson. As such, the brighter kids do not have to wait around for the others to play catch-up while the slower kids do not have to rush through concepts to be at par with their brighter peers. The teacher also then knows where to focus particular attention, resources and time.

However, there are some drawbacks to this method as it could also lead to discrimination of those students or pupils who may have disadvantages that are not of their own making such as lack of exposure, lack of reading material and resources at home, potentially resulting in low marks that have nothing do with their IQ.

Given that grouping is done after tests, sometimes intelligent learners miss out after performing badly on the particular test for one reason or another; hence the labelling may not be reflective of their true potential. The progressive class may therefore be labelled as slow or daft, and with this comes the stigma from other students, and even teachers.

Usually, these classes become stuck with less experienced teachers who also do not put in their best efforts. Once grouped in the progress class, one is stuck in it for the next two years of "O" Level, which leads to stagnation even when one has improved in terms of their effort and performance.

I am sure Mr Mahaja and his team considered all these factors and their conclusion was that screening was the best way forward.

After my strong showing in the first term, submitting assignments and getting good grades, speculation had been building on about who was better in class, the new kid on the block, or the old warhorses of Christopher and Trueness. Watchers and observers waited with baited breath.

Beating Christopher and Trueness for the top position became one of my main goals, spurring me on to work even harder. That we were now going to be screened was an opportunity for me to prove my mettle, move to a class with a better symbol and ring to it after my initial placement in Form Three C, was suggestive of a student placed in a class needing special attention and guidance. I hit the ground running, allocating more time to study so that come end of term I would not only write and pass my exams convincingly, but be moved to Form Three "A" while at the same time beating Christopher and Trueness for the top spot.

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