Connecting the dots...

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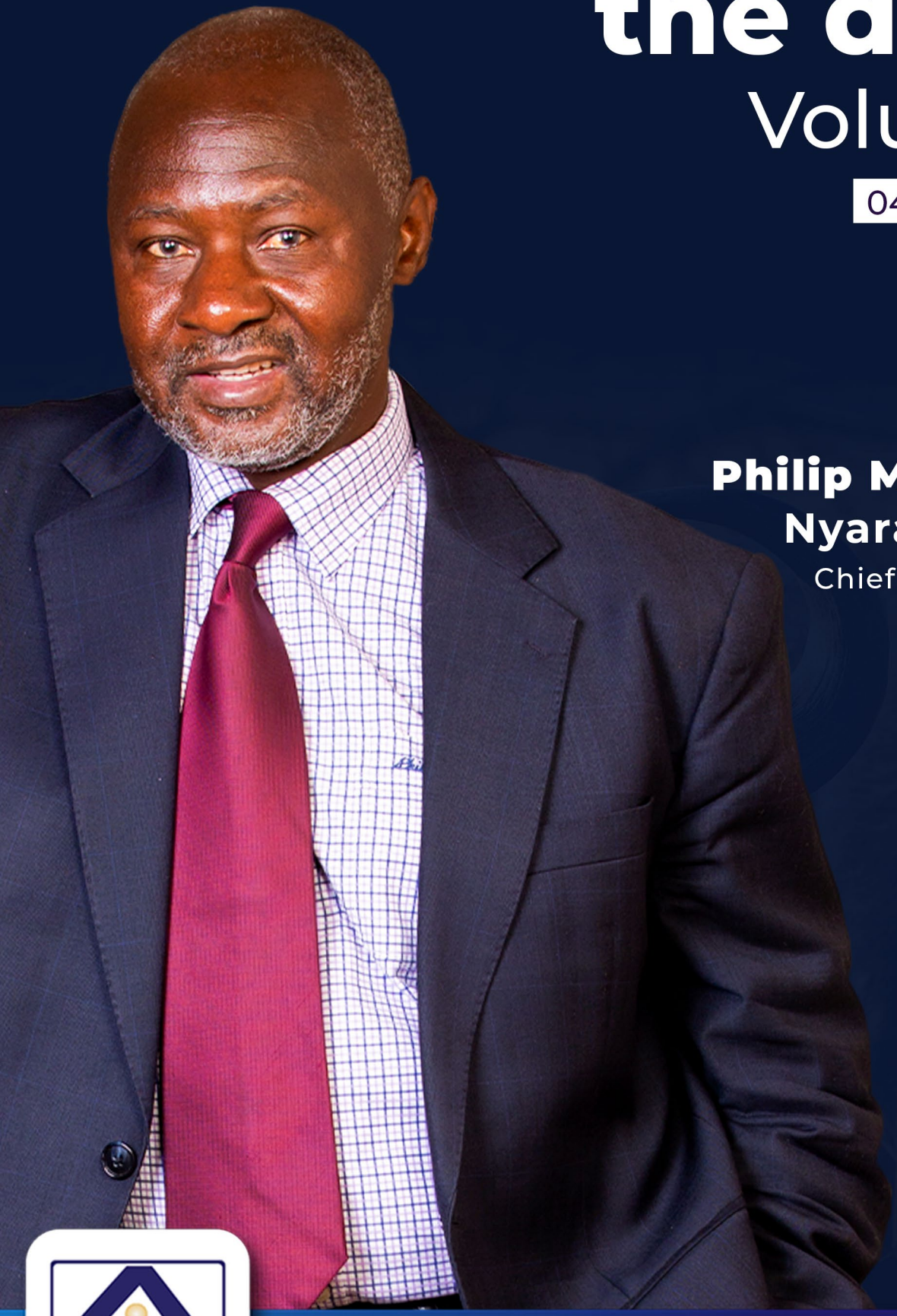

Philip Mataranyika
Nyaradzo Group,
Chief Executive Officer

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School and leadership roles - striking the balance...

The opening day for the new school year in 1985 was as hectic as a non-stop, high volume Samba soundtrack for both teaching and non-teaching staff at Rukweza Secondary School. It was worse for the students as we were all trying to settle in our new classrooms after a long, exhausting summer holiday.

Typical of the beginning of a school calendar, we had to adjust quickly to the hustle and bustle of student life in a rural setting, where the lack of basic amenities at school meant that we had to go beyond the normal call of duty to improve our chances of passing the end of year national examinations. At the time, Rukweza Secondary only went up to Form Four. Having completed our Form Three studies the previous year, we were now the seniors at the school – admired by the three streams below us. As the school's guiding light, being in Form Four was a source of pride and respect, although it also came with heavy responsibilities that not many of us were cut out for.

Equally excited were the new Form Three students, who fancied themselves as the next group of seniors-in-waiting. The introduction of screening tests the previous year had, however, meant that it was no longer going to be business as usual for the Form Three's if they were in the bottom class, which was the butt of jokes at the school.

For the Form Ones, the feelings were mixed. Although a few of them were like dogs with two tails, frolicking around in their new school uniforms, a good number of them were tense and unsure of what was in store for them. Having made that life-changing transition from primary school where they had spent seven years of their childhood, the freshmen looked up to teachers and prefects to take them through some form of orientation.

As the school's newly-crowned Head Boy, the buck stopped with me, together with Head Girl, Trueness Matamisa, when it came to minor administrative issues that fell within the purview of the prefects. It was overwhelming and felt like I had been thrown to the deep end as I had not occupied any position of authority or responsibility before, not even that of class monitor. I also had been out of formal school for many years, during which time what I had learnt could hardly fill the back of a postage stamp after I had failed to acquit myself well, academically and behaviourally, several years before.

As a matter of fact, 'mischief' had been my middle name in primary school until the school of hard knocks mended my ways thereafter! It helped that I had been through a lot myself, and by the time I was admitted back into formal education, I was not only calmer but had matured with age, like a bottle of wine.

And here I was, as Head Boy for Rukweza Secondary School, which seven years ago, had an enrolment of just over one thousand two hundred and fifty students, drawn mainly from Ward 27 of Makoni West and its hinterland. My position came with its own challenges, as a lot more was expected from the Head Boy in dealing with Form One students; particularly because at that tender stage, they are a special group of learners who need to be handled with care if society is to bring the best out of them.

I had to hit the ground running learning on the job, cognisant of the fact that a rough landing for them could easily wreck their nerves, causing irreparable harm that would haunt them for the rest of their lives.

Creating a smooth transition for these rookies has, therefore, been one of the top priorities for most schools, with the responsibility of easing them into the school system falling mainly on the shoulders of teachers and prefects, with some parents mostly of group A schools playing a supportive role.

In rural setups, most parents are not bothered. As far as they are concerned, their responsibility ends once they have paid their children's fees and provided for uniforms and learning materials. What happens thereafter is, in their opinion, none of their business.

In their wisdom or lack thereof, they expect the school authorities to appreciate that they have fields to tend and domestic animals to take care of; without which the future of their children would be imperilled. Sadly, such attitudes pervade most communities, including urban ones, where the burden of integrating Form One students is left to be a bilateral affair shared between teachers and prefects.

As the education system continues to evolve, it is pleasing to note that the dial is shifting, with increased acceptance of safe spaces for Form One students as a prelude to ending challenges confronting the freshmen.

The challenges are many! Form One students must unlearn old habits, customs, fashions, and etiquette they would have become accustomed to in primary school. Furthermore, they must also adjust to new and unfamiliar faces of teachers and peers as well as adapt to novel ways of thinking, including different expectations.

As the Head Boy at Rukweza, I had to walk a fine line when dealing with Form Ones, in cases to do with indiscipline. Where I had irrefutable evidence of unruly behaviour, my team and I didn't hesitate to nip it in the bud. In dispensing justice, we had to be firm but fair – without fear or favour. And if I were to err, it had to be on the side of caution, and I had the courage and grace of admitting to my failings.

To avoid overstepping the boundaries, I would imagine I was walking on eggshells. I had heard heart-wrenching tales of how seniors stampeded each other to fool and toss around Form One students without any sense of shame.

Unless one had a big brother or big sister at the same school to keep an eagle eye on troublemakers who may be out to play a fast one on their siblings, the first days in high school were for those with nerves of steel. It used to be pretty normal at boarding schools, for example, for bullies to unleash their full wrath on Form One students when they were still coming to terms with the double-whammy of their prolonged separation from their parents or guardians as well as their new environment.

With the scourge of bullying among strangers in the land, combined with the brouhaha from their hangers-on, it is quite possible that some of the Form One students were left with unbearable emotional scars that never healed. It must have been traumatising and dehumanising to be exposed to such barbaric acts by fellow students who should have known better, while still in the process of developing the mental capacity to be able to create coherent narratives on their own, out of these events.

It cannot be ruled out that in extreme cases, this led to dejection, loss of self-concept, and alienation from school, which often led to rejection of the school system that manifested in the victims dropping out of school altogether.

To create safe spaces for Form One students, a few local schools are leading by example by adopting well-developed structures that ease them into their system. A few kilometres outside of Marondera in Mashonaland East and established in 1955 under the Rectorship of Fred Snell, Peterhouse School developed and opened Tinokura, or the D Block in 1988, for Form One pupils.

According to the school's portal, Tinokura, which is Shona for "we are growing up", was established based on the idea of giving first year students a somewhat relaxed yet comprehensive outlook to the institution. Over the years, it has become a citadel upon which D Block students are integrated into any one of the school's six boarding houses, Malvern, Grinham, Ellis, Snell, Founders and Paget.

In its simplest form, Tinokura provides an environment where Form One lads can grow in structure and form the bonds of friendship that will last them throughout secondary education and beyond. This is where they are inducted into the traditions and cultures of the school.

To help them settle, the Form One students are placed in one of the six main Houses, but live in their House dormitory at Tinokura House for their first year. The Houses are headed by six fifth form monitors, or prefects, who would have been identified as having natural skills and talent to shepherd the young boys. The role of the form monitors extends to providing assistance and a helping hand to the younger boys, while also ensuring high levels of behavioural standards and tidiness befitting its motto "Conditur in Petra", translated, "It is founded on the rock."

Although the Peterhouse model is a hard act to follow for most schools that operate on shoe-string budgets, there is a meeting of minds amongst educationists that students' transitioning from primary to secondary school is one of the most difficult phases in their educational career.

While every student wishes to have more freedom and make new friends, many children have mixed feelings about entering Form One. Headlining their fears are reservations about being picked on and teased by older students, having to work harder, more subjects, more teachers, receiving lower grades and being lost in a larger, unfamiliar school community.

Success in navigating these challenging situations does not only affect children's academic performance but their general sense of well-being and mental health. If not appropriately structured to deal with the implicit impressions, tensions, and dynamics, the consequences could be too ghastly to contemplate.

In fact, the school authorities, more specifically teachers, have their own anxieties too, as they ponder whether the students will be serious in their studies; whether or not they will do better than their predecessors; how to complete the syllabus without leaving anyone behind; and whether new students would be added, and if so, how many. When dealing with Form One students, their smooth integration into the school system helps the teachers adopt effective strategies that bring them closer to realising what they would be seeking to achieve.

Regardless of their individual worries, both teachers and students look forward to better outcomes, uniting them in their mission to improve pass rates and grades and increasing loyalty amongst hitherto strangers in the classroom.

Even though Rukweza Secondary School didn't have a documented approach of facilitating the integration of Form One students into the school, their hearts were in the right place. Teachers and prefects had a vital role to play to assist the Form One students in a smooth transition. It was particularly the responsibility of us prefects to help them pull through it all.

As the Head Boy, I had to see to it that they were taken through the school's do's and don'ts, what was expected of them and that they were taken on a guided tour of the institution. In no time, I had come to the realisation that using a positive and reassuring voice was sine quo non to gaining their trust and confidence, which helped in drawing them out of their shells.

To avoid being found wanting where it mattered – my school work – I had to juggle several balls with the mastery of an ancient Chinese performer. Having the added responsibility of heading the Youth Fellowship at Rukweza United Methodist Church, it was in my best interests not to be all administration. I still had my school work to contend with, otherwise I would have the tunnel vision of focusing only on my administrative functions to the detriment of my studies.

I knew that within no time, mid-year exams would be around the corner, and I couldn't afford to be found wanting since the tests were the perfect yardstick to gauge our preparedness for the final Form Four exams. I also needed to maintain my pole position among the best-of-the-best in Form Four A.

On the academic front, it was all systems go! We were introduced to three new teachers, namely Messrs Steve Mandimika, Thomas Sambo, whom we were told were graduates from the University of Zimbabwe and Oscar Chitemamwise, a graduate from one of the country's teacher training colleges.

Mr Mandimika became our new History teacher on account of his predecessor, Mr Mushanawani's well-deserved promotion to another school where he had been appointed Deputy Headmaster.

After a few lessons, we would get to like him for his intellect and grasp of the subject, especially his knowledge of European history. I would particularly find it fascinating how modern nation states evolved in the nineteenth century, taking their influence beyond their borders as they expanded their territories and empires across the seas. Equally intriguing for me was how these empires eventually collapsed like a deck of cards. Even though I dislike violence in all its forms, historical accounts of the civil war in the United States, the First World War and revolutions that swept through France, Italy, Germany and the Austrian Empire, leading to their failure, would stick in my mind.

Mr Mandimika would illuminate our class with his easy-to-follow teaching methods and would leave us asking for more. Whereas the study of history is often referred to as uninteresting, our History teacher stimulated a profound interest and enthusiasm for learning about the past and developing a deeper understanding of individuals, people and societies. Thanks to Mr Mandimika, I became wiser and smarter, having drunk from his reservoir of knowledge.

As with the other new teachers, Mr Mandimika must have been briefed about the conduct of us students by his predecessor as he knew each and every one of us like the back of his hand. Before long, I was on his favourites' list.

For Mathematics and Science, which had previously been the responsibility of Mr Nenge, we now had Messrs Chitemamwise and Sambo, respectively. We were told that Mr Nenge had hung up his boots. I however, didn't have the opportunity to dig in to know what qualifications he had, for him to have been our Maths and Science teacher.

Now that we had Mr Chitemamwise to take us through Mathematics, there was a massive difference in how I came to understand the subject. Mr Chitemamwise had a complete and solid grasp of his subject, and what a fantastic tutor he was!

On his first day of our lesson, he advised us that the syllabus had been changed from Cambridge "O" Level Mathematics (Syllabus B) which we had done in Form Three, to Cambridge Mathematics (Syllabus D).

Like with all new things, we initially thought the new syllabus was Greek to us. Before long we would catch on thanks to the teaching skills of Mr Chitemamwise. That the syllabus was changed, was not new, over the years, it had undergone several revisions from the 1950s, when Syllabus A was succeeded by Syllabus B in the 1960s. However, other jurisdictions leapfrogged to Syllabus C, otherwise known as Modern Mathematics.

Syllabus B had been mainly algebra and geometry, while Syllabus D was much broader. It encouraged the development of mathematical knowledge as a critical life skill and as a basis for more advanced study.

It also helped build learners' confidence by helping them develop a feel for numbers, patterns and relationships while placing a strong emphasis on solving problems and presenting and interpreting results.

We were expected to understand how to communicate and reason using mathematical concepts and being proficient in the use of an electronic calculator.

Topics covered included arithmetic, algebra, graphs, geometry, vectors, probability, statistics and trigonometry. The syllabus describes the instructional objectives for each topic and lists the main concepts and learning outcomes.

It helped increase our intellectual curiosity, develop mathematical language as a means of communication and investigation, and explore mathematical ways of reasoning. Furthermore, it enabled us to acquire and apply skills and knowledge relating to numbers, measure and space in mathematical situations we would inevitably meet in life.

It also took us through expressing direct and inverse variation in algebraic terms; using this form of expression to find unknown quantities while at the same time taking us through probabilities. Regarding the latter, we would tease each other as students about the probability of having two girls eloping pregnant.

We found Statistics a bit challenging, learning about descriptive statistics, Venn Diagrams, normal distribution curves, Standard Deviation, hypothesis testing, confidence intervals, sampling and others. Before the introduction of syllabus D, we talked about the locus of a point, which was one of the topics we covered in geometry. One of the cases we teased each other about was calculating the locus of the grazing area of a goat tethered to a tree with a rope two meters long.

I enjoyed geometry so much that in the second and third terms, I would be called into some of the Form Four classes to help students work out such questions on the board during tea and lunch breaks, helping them understand the concepts.

When syllabus D was introduced, I had to find my feet quickly, so I could become the top student, even for this new syllabus. While it took a bit of time to get us students tuned in, we found the new syllabus exciting once we got the hang of it.

Our new Science teacher, Mr Thomas Sambo, had an exceptional understanding of Zim-Sci (Zimbabwe Secondary School Science Project) and would make us apply scientific principles in solving problems and in understanding new situations, describing observations, recording results, interpreting and drawing conclusions from experiments.

Mr Sambo was also comfortable and gifted at demonstrating scientific terms, laws, facts, concepts, theories and phenomena. His knowledge and understanding of scientific and technological applications with their social, economic and environmental implications was also second to none, as was his ability to enable us to demonstrate relevant attitudes to science such as accuracy and precision, objectivity, integrity, enquiry initiative, teamwork and inventiveness.

Zim-Sci was more of an omnibus concept whereby learners were taken through the basics of biology, chemistry and physics. In relation to biology, we learned about life, animals and plants, the physical basis for animal and human behavior. We also learnt about the brain, immune system, nervous system, and genetics, cells and levels of organization, nutrition; the respiratory system, reproduction in plants and animals, and health and diseases.

In chemistry, we learnt about laboratory rules and safety; about matter, acids, bases and salts; oxidation and reduction; industrial processes and organic chemistry, while in physics we had to grasp measurements; force; energy, magnetism, electricity as well as an introduction to Sir Isaac Newton's laws of motion.

One of his laws of motion we learnt about back then states that, "for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction", and has stuck with me ever since.

Another of his laws we learnt states that, "an object will not change its motion unless it is acted upon by a force".

The origins of Zim-Sci, which we did back then, can be traced back to the late 1970s when an academic, Alan Dock, who at the time was a lecturer at the Science Education Centre of the University of Rhodesia, developed a Distant Science Teaching Unit.

Dock's idea was framed around providing low-cost science education to millions of African students, especially those who were studying through correspondence since there were not many opportunities in formal education that were open to them.

His branch of science education was to be offered through teacher-proof materials also available through instructional audio cassette tapes. Instead of the idea dying a natural death with the arrival of independence in 1980, it gained momentum after the majority government of then Prime Minister Robert Gabriel Mugabe got hitched to it. They viewed it as the only practical and cost-effective way of achieving their philosophy of universal education for all from primary to secondary education.

Dock's reasoning was therefore adopted lock, stock and barrel as the panacea to extending science learning to all schools in Zimbabwe, in advancement of the incoming administration's thirst to achieve its political objectives without having to break the bank.

Coming from a downtrodden family, I am glad to have been a beneficiary of Dock's creative intervention, which sharpened my problem-solving and decision-making skills. Consequently, I grew a certain level of confidence in passing my "O" Level exams, despite our having new teachers and a new Mathematics syllabus that had changed midstream. Even as our new teachers were a breath of fresh air, I knew I had to work hard to pass all of my subjects.

From the bottom of class positions in grades five, six and seven, to the top of the class, enjoying a cult-like hero status amongst the school authorities at Rukweza Secondary School, I was in dreamland as my path in life was beginning to take shape. My appointment as the school Head Boy introduced me to leadership not just of the students at Rukweza Secondary, but primed and prepared me for the future leadership roles I would assume.

With all these responsibilities keeping me busy and broadening my horizons, I knew I needed to avoid losing my footing resulting in a big fall. Instead I kept my cool, worked hard, remained focused and continued to walk the straight and narrow.

References:

https://www.peterhouse.co.zw/boarding-life/tinokura