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Influence of Transitional Youth Program on Peer Relationships among Post-High School Youth: A Case Study of the Transitional VUMA Program of Nairobi Chapel Church, Nairobi Kenya

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Abstract:

Post high school youth programs have lately been recognized as key in facilitating transition from school to college or work. They have highly contributed to the holistic growth of participants: spiritual, social, personal and physical. As the education system in Kenya releases over half a million youth into tertiary institutions annually, there is generally a gap year between school and campus that has been utilized by family and institutions to occupy the youth and equip them with skills that can foster college adjustment. It is on this premise that the study sought to find out the influence of transitional programs on the social lives of the youth, especially in connecting with peers within the theoretical framework of the rite of passage schema. Phenomenological research design was done qualitatively among 30 out of 112 participants of the 2018 edition of the Nairobi Chapel VUMA program with the main tool being interviews. Six counselors were also interviewed together with the program director. The data was transcribed and coded using the NVIVO software; thereby producing themes for discussion. Findings showed that the youth experienced social adaptation which led to a sense of community through close interactions. They also acquired social skills including choosing the right friends and resilience through conflict management. These relationships and skills would hopefully enable youth to adjust to life beyond school.

Keywords: *Communitas, Rites of Passage (ROP), bonding, sense of belonging*

1. Introduction

Late adolescence and young adulthood are a very critical stage of life. They are marked with several changes that require adjustment: leaving school and joining college or work, physical maturity and sociopsychological issues in view of the newfound freedom. These changes are often marked with disorientation and ambiguity. Many traditional cultures all over the world, have for a long time provided Rites of Passages (ROPs) to respond to the ambiguity and ensure smooth transition to adulthood that enhanced community identity and enabled members to smoothly transition from one stage of life to the next (Gennep, 2011, p. 3). This enhanced societal stability and ensured transmission of desirable values to the younger generation who then became responsible members of the society.

Modernity has dealt a major blow to the continuity of the traditional African modes of transition to adulthood. Urbanization and ultimate globalization, missionary influence and Western education are major factors that have interrupted the African cultural practice (Nwadiokwu et al., 2016, p. 45). Even though many communities have retained initiation rites, they often happen soon after primary school education. After high school when they are now recognized by law as adults from the age of eighteen (Kenya Law Reform Commission 2021, 1), there is no other ROP. With the breakdown of the formerly stable family and societal systems, modern youth find alternative means of transition to adulthood: "Youth will create and define their own marker events based on peer media values, many of which may be destructive both individually and communally" (Blumenkrantz & Goldstein, 2010). These markers will include "risk-taking behaviour such as violence, substance use, gangs, bullying, and delinquency [Merten, 2005 as cited in (Glozah & Lawani, 2014, p. 1190)].

The future of any generation is vested in the younger generation; therefore, raising morally upright and responsible youth should be a key agenda in society. This realization prompted some churches to develop curricula to train and equip youth within a residential environment for a definite period of time, in this case three months. Very little scholarly attention has focused on these programs even though conversational feedbacks point to their usefulness. This paper examines the influence of a pre-college transitional program on friendship among youth as means of building meaningful relationships that facilitate coping with adult life as Christians.

2. Problem Statement

Youth transition to adulthood and college readiness is increasingly becoming a concern not only in the society at large, but also in the church in Kenya today. The post high school transition period occurs between departure from school and arrival at college, marked with a sense of adulthood without full responsibility (McGregor, 2017, p. 9). The socializing agents at this stage include parents, peers, other adults and the media, with peers and media being noted as the strongest influence to most (Barry et al., 2010, p. 314). Youth therefore need support in order to cope with the realities of the present and the challenges of the future. Strong and positive friendship among peers is essential in enabling the youth to start young adult life meaningfully. A few churches have made efforts to fill the void created by modernity by seeking to equip youth with various skills for adult life beyond high school through shared experiences over a defined period of time. This study sought to establish the influence of the VUMA program on friendship as a means of preparing youth for college and adult life.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Theoretical Foundation

3.1.1. Van Gennep's Rite of Passage Theory

Van Gennep is credited as the initiator of the concept of rites of passage in relation to various life stages including initiation in many traditional cultures in 1909. He observed that there are three phases: separation (pre-liminal), liminality and reintegration (post-liminal) with the liminal phase being transformational (Gennep, 2013, p. 11). As a rite of maturation, the ROP begins with separation and ends with the youth assuming a new status as though they are reborn.

Turner (2017) supported and developed Van Gennep's theory further by focusing on the liminal phase. Turner's main contribution was the focus on the liminal phase. expounded on the concept of liminality as a 'betwixt and between socially established categories and not simply the condition of being in the midst of two stages in a ritual' (Neumann, 2012, p. 474). He further described liminality is applicable to individuals, groups and entire societies. The duration can be anything between moments (events), periods (weeks, months, or years) and epochs (decades and centuries) (Andrews & Roberts, 2012, p. 24). Turner also identified three markers of liminality in ritual presentations: contact with the sacred, ludic deconstruction and simplification of relations in the social structure (Lipska & Zagórska, 2019, p. 5). Andrews and Roberts develop the theory further by recognizing contextual realities of liminality including the role of nature, human involvement and the unpredictability of duration in the liminal phase (Andrews & Roberts, 2012, p. 33). Consequently, in traditional societies, the rites of passage are "fundamental to the creation of social order, and plainly represent some of the most intense, emotionally charged and socially transformative episodes in people's lives..." (Insoll, 2011, p. 268). On the other hand, the transformative phase largely depends on the passage itself; for example, marriage focuses more on attachment, death relates more with separation, while coming to age rites are more about the liminal phase (Blumenkrantz, 2016, p. 79).

Blumenkrantz and Goldstein note that communally sanctioned rites of passage have diminished in the modern age; calling for the need for alternative means of transitioning young people into college where youth are expected to be responsible adults (Blumenkrantz & Goldstein, 2014, p. 87). They further propose anchoring rites of passage in college for freshmen such that faculty and students can be the elders who guide them and help them settle down; although this is not our focus in this study, it is worth mentioning. The activities need to be communally accepted and relevant to the youths' needs (Blumenkrantz & Goldstein, 2014, p. 88).

3.2. Empirical Literature

Youth programs have been recognized in various studies as conducive for youth development. Youth attain self-awareness and a sense of belonging (Dangott, 2014, p. 12). After school youth programs promote youth leadership development (Brantley, 2016, p. 19). Brief camp experiences also improve social competencies and internal motivation even though it is not clear how long these attributes last after camp (Bowers et al., 2019, p. 134).

Camping experiences also include a sense of community: *communitas*. The campers find themselves sharing accommodation, food and sometimes uniform that puts them at the same level regardless of their social background. Opportunities for making friends abound coupled with an eagerness to try out new things without the "eyes of the world and 'familiar boundaries'" (Foster & McCabe, 2015, p. 58). Camp enables people to discover their 'true selves' through shared experiences in a context away from normal routine (Brooker & Joppe, 2014, pp. 336-337).

Regarding Christian camps, Sorenson acknowledges that even though they have been long in existence, very little research has been done on their 'unique characteristics and outcomes' (Sorenson, 2018, p. 188). A study done on a week-long summer camp revealed five characteristics: relational, safe space, participatory, unplugged from home and faith-centered. The uniqueness of the Christian camp is on its' faith-focus, which may not intentionally appear in other camps. Eventually, camp experience should not be seen as an isolated life-changing event, but as part of the larger scheme of all life realities (Sorenson, 2018, p. 197).

In Positive Youth Development (PYD) studies, it has been established that camps have a positive impact on youth. In one study, two key factors were identified that manifested two main features: counselor-related and participant (youth)-related factors. First, effective camp counselors were described as having the following characteristics: "a) understanding and compassionate b) ability to maintain equanimity c) having a sense of humor, and d) being a positive role model" (Halsall et al., 2016, p. 24). Secondly, youth engagement strategies included "(a) individualizing the activities,

(b) facilitating initial engagement by making it fun, (c) creating an autonomy-supportive environment, and (d) providing leadership opportunities" (Halsall et al., 2016, p. 25). It is also clear that the camp model results in various benefits among the youth. "Camp is more than a location or program; it encompasses the affective, cognitive, behavioral, physical, social and spiritual benefits that youth receive during and after the camping experience" (Garst et al., 2011, pp. 73–74).

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study was phenomenological. This qualitative approach is concerned with how "individuals consciously reflect on and experience their *lifeworld*...the person is seen as a conscious actor who actively constructs meaning...the way the world appears to people..." (Langdrige, 2008). This concurs with Creswell 2014 and Mohajan (2018, 8) in that the main focus is the lived-out experiences and their meaning to an individual or group. Data collection was done between January and March 2019, which was eight to ten months after the program; providing a retrospective perspective of the program. Ethical processes were observed including obtaining research permission from the government.

4.2. Target Population and Sampling

The VUMA 2018 participants were targeted. Many participants were already in campus or working. VUMA 2018 had a population of 112 participants. Access was provided by the program director. The snowball sampling method was used to get the participants such that subjects who were available to the researcher were selected; with further contact-sharing from the participants until a point of saturation was reached (Naderifar et al., 2017, p. 3). The participants were spread out all over the country; only those who were reachable and willing to participate were interviewed out of a given list of 40 from the church.

4.3. Data Analysis

The data collected was recorded using an MP3 and a phone after which it was transferred to a PC machine and transcribed into text form. The NVIVO software was then used for coding before subsequent description and thematic analysis.

5. Findings

The study sought to determine the influence of the VUMA program in the peer relationships of the participants. The emerging themes included social adaptation and building social skills.

5.1. Social Adaptation

In ROP terms, young people usually underwent a three-phase process: disengagement from home, bonding with peers, and reconnecting with the home environment while disengaging from peers. Transition involved letting go of the familiar in order to allow for new bonds. Disengaging involved giving up the idea of friends from home, forming new friendships and learning more about the new friend(s). Respondent R24 explains that being away from home and focusing on one thing made them unite and have a sense of belonging to each other as a family: 'In VUMA actually we were like one group; we were riding for one goal. So, that gave us like one opinion, we were like one mind actually.'

From the foregoing, the camp model was socially a 'melting pot' for the Vumites. Having come from different backgrounds to share a common life, the differences slowly ebbed away as they jointly formed a new identity. This new identity entailed bonding with people of diverse backgrounds and character. R13 describes the scenario at VUMA: there were 'the rich and poor, those who would do things to please others, rule breakers, the obedient, quiet and outgoing...' R5 analyzes the differences to include: diverse backgrounds, upbringing, schooling and individual reasoning; but with individual uniqueness. The main principle of bonding was godly relationships; as R17 explains that 'So, they taught us how to bond...how you should relate with other people in a godly way and how we should cope with people despite the differences.'

One of the main avenues for building a sense of community was the small groups that existed for Bible study, discussions and games. R14 also explains that loosening up happened through group activities in games, discussions and shared chores. Some Vumites found the groups to be like family. R7, R13, and R17 found a new 'family' through the discussion groups and opportunity to share family backgrounds. R13 explains,

The groups we were placed in became like a family where you share your experiences. We were just given topics that would make you open up to them so that the group became like your family... Also, during the relationship week, we had to interact and open up about our relationship with our parents, our siblings and even the opposite sex so it was really helpful.

Another avenue for socialization was shared accommodation; in particular, room sharing. At some point during the program, there was a reshuffle of roommates as part of enforcing further mingling. For some people this interrupted the bonds they had already started forming. They found themselves among strangers once again and had to form new friendships. R4 states that others would still go back to their former roommates with whom they were familiar and had become like sisters, sharing various life issues. 'I was so adapted to my former roommates so when we were reshuffled the new roommates were not like the former ones. You find that people still want to go to their friends.'

The sense of community provided an atmosphere of learning from one another. With time, each person found their place in the community and made their contribution through various means: leadership, talent, service, etc. One of the main ideas was how to navigate through life challenges as a Christian. R3 learnt more about his faith from others.

So, I came to know more people and we came to share new ideas about Christ, and about different and various challenges of life and as the saying goes, two heads are better than one, so you come with the solution to a certain problem. And that's the best part of knowing more people, the importance of knowing most people, and with more people in Christ, you can do great things. Because we are one as a family and Christ is the head of the family, that's the church.

Shared personal experiences therefore formed a significant aspect of VUMA. Many respondents cited benefits like sharing background information, life experiences and future dreams which helped them to appreciate and shape each other and find answers to some of their life questions. People often learn from each other and remember better the stories shared. R10 explains,

First of all, people are different; these people they know a lot than I know. So, it was my best time to interact to get to know about their background where they come from; get to know how their life has been; like sharing these testimonies so that we can share... what are your dreams?

Sharing experiences also brought healing and restoration among the Vumites. As they lived together in their rooms, they became like sisters and shared their life issues. R4 observes that deep wounds were being dealt with at VUMA through sharing.

It was so important people sharing experiences; people sharing some deeper things they have not been sharing; you know there are some people who had suffered bitterness and it made them have a negative attitude about how they view life... it makes a big difference when you have a group you share, as in we learnt a lot.

In the same context, shared experiences helped people to learn that there were people who had gone through worse situations and made it. This encouraged those who were undergoing certain struggles that they too would overcome. Besides, this leads to self-confidence knowing that one is not alone; these problems are not that unique.

Within the community of VUMA, socialization led to formation of very close friendships that would impact some in a great way. R5, a non-LogosVumite, explains she met one of her closest friends while at VUMA: 'She has really helped me in my personal walk with God and essentially VUMA we meet in church.' R14 happens to be that friend and she describes how they related after VUMA: 'We can't move without talking to each other; just to know how each and every person is in terms of Christianity in terms of health, in terms of family, in terms of everything.' R9 also learnt to come out of her shyness and connect with people through games and group discussions where she learnt to understand people and herself.

Regarding interaction with the opposite gender, the Vumites had different experiences, mostly based on their previous exposure. There were those who had closely interacted with the opposite gender at home and in mixed schools like R1, R9, R13 and R16; at VUMA they did not find much change. Some had limited previous exposure like R11 and R25 who were in boys' boarding high schools. They found VUMA very helpful in understanding ladies and relating with them as friends in preparation for campus life. 'VUMA helped me to understand them and then to build friendship with them. You know it made me realize you can interact with a lady; you can be close to her without actually being in a relationship with her.' R22, R24, R28 and R29 observed that there should be clearly determined boundaries when socializing with the opposite gender with the goal of pleasing God. R24 explains that relating with the opposite gender should have certain limits. This included the choice of a prayer partner who should preferably be of the same gender. R24 explains,

During VUMA they were saying your prayer partner was not actually to be of the opposite gender...if it were of the opposite gender, then it causes confusion. So, you were to mingle with different gender and during a prayer partner same gender.

Sense of community sometimes outlives camp programs. Quite a number of ex-Vumites maintained the community bond beyond VUMA which became a support group to many as they transitioned to campus. With social media avenues, it was possible to maintain contact among several but not all Vumites because some changed or lost their contacts; while others did not have phone numbers during VUMA. R13 shares the benefit of the group: 'I still keep in touch with some of my friends in VUMA who really had a true transformation so we get to check up on each other and they get to check up on me so they make sure that am still on the path and I make sure that they are still on the path. That has been a really helpful support.' R21 and R30 agree that the strong sisterly and brotherly bonds among Vumites created a desire to look out for each other and form a WhatsApp group which became a platform for refreshing memories about VUMA experiences. Already, at the point of departure, there were signs of pain due to separation. R25 observes that parting at the end of the program was one hard thing. 'It was also the saddest moment because we could part ways with the friends that you had made that bond that had been made three months.' Eventually, individuals developed strategies of keeping friendships initiated at VUMA. R2 kept eight close friends with whom he daily communicated, twenty regular contacts and a few more he was able to connect with at church on a regular basis.

Social bonds can be a basis for socialization into faith for new converts. This often happens when there are personalized relationships. R4 became a Christian at VUMA and found great support through having a prayer partner. Social connections facilitated socialization into her newfound faith. She explains, 'We were taught how you can walk, we even had like you get your own partner so that you walk together, and you learn together so that person becomes your accountability partner...I am still in touch with that partner'.

5.2. Building Social Skills

Transitional residential program setting can be conducive for building social skills. These include confidence,

respect for others including the opposite gender, servanthood and public speaking. VUMA served as a platform for building and enhancing such skills. R27 sums up what they were taught in the area of social skills: how to interact with other people, and how to choose good friends based on character. Character here means the person influences you positively because they are well behaved, as you too influence them positively. Counselor M2 and M6 highlight the following skills: respect for others, public speaking, self-confidence, having a servanthood spirit and appreciation for ladies. M2 points out: 'Are you respectful? Can you address yourself through public speaking? Can you address yourself in front of a people? You'll be doing projects and you'll be told to come and present it before in front of our class, will you be able to?' M6 explains that during his time, they were never allowed to serve before the girls serve i.e., ladies first. They were made to understand that women are not objects, we are equal. It was his first time to hear about that preaching-male and female are equal. They were taught to protect their sisters and mothers. Those whose dads had passed were encouraged to take charge at home.

5.2.1. Choosing the Right Friends

Social skills include the ability to choose the right friends. A number of respondents confirmed that VUMA enabled them to discern good from bad friends and how to disconnect from the latter. For example, R22 who accepted Christ at VUMA began relating with Christian friends who went to church after VUMA. This resulted in behavior change that manifested in his quiet and respectful attitude towards both the young and the old. In view of this, we will examine the process of building the right friendships based on the data at hand.

Firstly, beginning with the process of disconnection, R16 explains that she gradually dropped some friends because,

They were not adding so much value to my life. So, I had to discard them because one of the things that we were also taught is that when a person does not add value to your life, you shouldn't keep them...because they will just keep holding you back.

These former friends had a negative perception of Christianity and put pressure on her to conform and be 'cool': they 'think converting into Christian is like old school or something not cool... It's not the thing.' They had made her feel ashamed of being a Christian.

Secondly, going beyond connection and looking back to influence those that appear to be negative company is critical. R29 not only learnt how to develop positive friendship, but also took it upon herself to seek ways of influencing her generation in a positive manner including those she deemed to be bad company. This was also the prayer of R15- to be in the camp so that she could be a light to others. 'One of my main reason why I came to VUMA...even the day before I started VUMA at night, I'm like Lord, I want to be a light in this camp or wherever it is that I go...' This resolve enabled her to make use of every opportunity during the camp to intentionally go out of her way to connect with people and positively impact them.

Thirdly, the foundation laid at VUMA had a ripple effect at campus level. Vumites learnt to avoid negative friendship that could mislead them and to be assertive. R13 explains that 'I think in VUMA it just got stronger even now that am here, I still continue. So far, I've not stepped into a club. I've just kept to be me I have not joined funny groups.' In applying assertiveness, she only allows boys into her room during the day with rules to be observed; for example, they should be accompanied by female friends. This was reiterated by R1 as essential for all relationships; she learnt to maintain her own principles and not move with the mass. She opines, 'So I learnt that you can still have a group of friends but don't let them make decisions for you. So, make decisions yourself.'

5.2.2. Interacting with Others

The free social environment in a camp setting set the foundation for healthy interpersonal relationships. This begins by shaping personality of the individual before learning to deal with others. A number of respondents reported that they learnt to loosen up at VUMA and eventually opened up and interacted with their peers. Looking back, R1 observes,

I was quite antisocial, I never knew how to interact with many people, I was a bit choosy on who to interact with, who to laugh with and all that, and so during VUMA, we had groups, we shared rooms, and so you find I chose to socialize with people in my room, people from the group so in fact it was a day-by-day social relationship with people.

R9, R15, R16 and R23, who were also of quiet demeanor, had to make friends, finding their own space, accommodate others, and intentionally making effort to fit into the social context. R23 explains that this included learning to cope with people of different tempers and loving them as they were: 'Like maybe people who are short tempered- how to relate with them and also how to act when with people like loving everyone. R18 also realized at VUMA that he could connect with anybody easily, initiate and sustain conversations.

A long time I used to think that I'm that weird guy who is silent in the corner. But through VUMA, once I started socializing with people, I started it seeing myself that I was able to talk to people and meet them halfway. I could associate with anybody and everybody and I will be the one who was always in initiating conversation. And that was something I did not believe I could do.

Conflict management is an essential survival skill in any given social context; VUMA was no exception. Maintaining a positive mindset is essential because this leads to self-understanding and appreciation of others. Learning to forgive, peaceful conflict resolution and patience with others is part of social life. There were three apparent modes of dealing with conflict: avoidance, tolerance and negotiation. Regarding avoidance, R1 recalls a situation where there was conflict among her friends. For the sake of peace, she chose to 'minimize the interaction for some time... I just take a step backward and avoid many issues.' On the other hand, tolerance builds resilience in the individual. This was the experience of R17 and her

friend who learnt forgiveness after conflict with roommates, resultant emotional pain and eventually learning to forgive and move on; resulting in healing, exercising patience and tolerance and reconciliation. Negotiation requires open communication concerning the issue at hand. R6, R16 and R20 who also experienced conflict at VUMA recommend that having open communication by listening to each other, and responsibly exercising freedom in humility and maturity despite personality differences. Regarding patience and tolerance, R25 explains, 'I was not that patient especially with people. But in VUMA, I met different kinds of people with different attitudes and behavior. So, I had to accommodate all of them. I learnt to control my temper.' On the other hand, learning how to handle different personalities rather than treating people the same is important. R4 explains,

We learnt how you can handle some people out there with different personalities; you know there are these people who are like they are sanguine, they are so hyper, they are talk a lot. But there is this person who will get quiet who is just seated there, then you are wondering what's going on; if you don't get to that person and ask what's going on, you won't know.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

VUMA participants developed a sense of community through interaction with their peers over the three-month camp period. This enabled them to make new friends, foster existing relationships, learn from each other and learn to handle conflict. It also led to appreciation of people from different backgrounds and finding one's place in the camp. Relationships built outlasted the camp and led to a loose form of an age-set as in the African ROP

It is recommended that programming of such a program should provide more avenues for building social skills that become handy in college life where there is plenty of freedom. After such a program, the church needs to put up follow up mechanisms that will ensure the 'age-group' keeps up even though they may be scattered in different parts of the country and the world. This will enhance long-term support systems for the youth as they venture into the unknown waters of adulthood.

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