

Figuring out who you are outside school this holiday

When school pauses, self-discovery begins. Holidays can reveal talents, passions, and strengths that grades never show. Away from routines and academic pressure, holidays are a time to rest.

BY GLORIA IRANKUNDA

For many of you, school is the map of who you are supposed to be as grades define each day. But once the classroom doors close for holidays, a different question begins to surface. Who are you when no one is marking your attendance or ranking your performance?

Across Uganda, this period is more than just a break from academics. It is a transition stage where teenagers begin to notice interests, habits and traits that were hidden under school structure.

Counsellors say this is a critical moment in identity formation. School gives you a fixed role, says youth counsellor Melissa Achieng. At school, you follow instructions and aim for marks. But when school ends for the term, that structure disappears and you are forced to meet yourself.

With holidays now underway, professionals say the challenge is not just avoiding boredom but actively using the time to explore identity in healthy ways.

Responsibilities at home

One of the simplest ways you begin to understand yourselves outside school is through responsibility at home. Helping with chores, managing small tasks or even supporting a family business can reveal strengths that are not visible in class.

17-year-old Sharon Nakato from Kabalagala, Kampala says she only realised she enjoys interacting with people after helping at her auntie's shop during her Senior Six vacation.

"The first days after school felt strangely empty. At school, I used to wake up knowing exactly where I needed to be and what I had to do," she says. Suddenly she had all this free time and did not know what to do with herself.

This confusion is not unusual, according to Achieng. Many students struggle with identity once the structured environment of school is removed.

"School provides structure that shapes behaviour and identity. When students leave, that structure disappears and they are forced to make decisions about who they are and what they want," Achieng explains.

She adds that adolescence is already a period of identity formation, and leaving school intensifies that process.

Finding self

"I felt useful only when I was

studying or being told what to do," she shares.

Nakato now spends her days helping at her auntie's shop while waiting for university admission. She says the transition has forced her to ask questions about identity.

"Outside school I started wondering if I am only a student or if there is more to me. I realised I enjoy talking to people and helping customers. That was something I never noticed before," she explains.

Achieng says these experiences often reveal communication skills, patience, leadership or organisation abilities that are not measured in exams.

Learning what you enjoy

Outside school, you are no longer

guided strictly by syllabuses. This opens space to explore personal interests.

Youth mentor Samuel Lutaaya, who works with school leavers in Kampala, says this is where identity begins to take shape.

Some discover creativity in writing or drawing. Others find interest in sports, technology, fashion or music.

"The challenge is helping young people separate academic identity from personal identity. Many young people think their value is only in their academic results," he says.

When school ends, they feel blank because they were never encouraged to explore who they are outside performance.

"We ask them simple questions such as what makes you happy or what problems do you enjoy solving. Slowly they start to see themselves beyond school performance," Lutaaya shares.

He adds that the shifts happens when you realise that iden-

REST, BUT WITH AWARENESS

Rest is necessary during holidays, but professionals warn against complete withdrawal from activity. "Too much isolation or sleep can blur self-awareness," Lutaaya says. He advises combining rest with light structure such as reading, movement and small responsibilities.

Stay active

Physical activity is another way you begin to understand yourself beyond academics. Whether it is football, cycling, running or simple exercise, movement helps young people understand discipline, endurance and motivation.

Psychologist Allan Mugisha says physical health is closely linked to mental clarity. When you are active, your mind becomes clearer, he says.

"You often discover that you are either energetic, competitive or more reflective through physical activity. For some sport becomes a passion. For others, it simply a way to manage stress and stay balanced," Mugisha explains.

Self-discovery on boring days

Mugisha explains that boredom often forces self-reflection.

"When everything is quiet, you start noticing your thoughts. That is when questions about identity appear," he says.

Instead of filling every hour with distractions, he encourages young people to allow some quiet time.

"It is in those moments that you may realise what you actually care about or what you do not enjoy," Mugisha adds.

Regulate social media use

In the present digital era, identity struggles are intensified by social media. Platforms often show peers appearing successful, busy or fully figured out. Nakato explains this can distort self-perception.

"You start thinking everyone has life figured out except you which could be wrong," she says.

She notes that holidays are a good time to disconnect slightly and focus on personal growth rather than comparison.

"Identity is not something you copy from others online. It is something you build from your own experiences," she adds.

Volunteering

Volunteering is another powerful way to understand yourself outside school.

"Helping in community clean ups, churches, children's homes or local initiatives exposes you to real world challenges," Lutaaya explains.

Youth mentors say such exposure helps you see whether you are service oriented, practical, creative or analytical.

Building relationships

Holidays create space for deeper interaction with family and friends, which can shape identity.

"Family conversations, shared responsibilities and group activities help teenagers understand how they relate to others, mirroring personality," Achieng explains.

She mentions that through the interactions, you may discover you are a listener, a leader or someone who prefers working alone.



Identity is not built in a day

Youth counsellor Melissa Achieng says identity is not immediate. It is shaped gradually through small decisions, new experiences and reflection outside academic pressure. Sharon Nakato, who is in her vacation, says she no longer sees the break as empty time. "I used to think holidays were just waiting time. Now I feel like I am learning things about myself that school never showed me," she shares. While there is no fixed label outside school, you have to meet yourself in real life situations. "Try new things, discard old assumptions and slowly figure out who you are when school is not defining your days," Lutaaya shares.



Try different talents this holiday to perfect them in this free time.