

- Lynné Schoeman

MISS NEWTON'S *new laws*

Parents and pupils of Mandela High were up in arms about the principal's announcement at assembly that Monday morning. Miss Newton was a formidable woman and a problem solver but this time she had gone too far.

"In light of the stress-induced epidemic of depression and anxiety that has plagued our school community in recent years, my staff members and I have come to the decision to abolish all tests and exams," she said from behind the lectern in the school hall.

Before her was a sea of incredulous young faces, and next to her on stage the frozen smiles of the teachers suggested they had simply been politely informed of this decision and had no say in it whatsoever.

"Of course, the matric learners will continue to prepare for the National Senior Certificate exams as usual, but for

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Grades 8 to 11, all forms of assessment will be based on group work.”

In that moment, you could tell the hardworking learners from the lazy ones judging by who were sighing and rolling their eyes, and who were excitedly rubbing their hands together.

“We believe this new system will elevate our school’s culture,” Miss Newton continued. “It will create a stress-free learning environment and help us understand that we are only as strong as our weakest link ...” She paused, as if expecting applause, but it never came. Instead, the hall erupted in chatter – and no one even bothered to whisper.

It was front-page news the next day.

Grade 11 learners and their parents worried about how they would get into university with a group mark. Those who planned on studying medicine, in particular, did not have much faith in the strength of the weakest link.

A few parents petitioned the Minister of Basic Education, and while she did not respond, the provincial education department released a statement in which they neither condemned nor condoned the notion but promised to put together a task team to investigate.

In the meantime, Miss Newton made uniforms optional, and implemented a daily morning yoga session. It involved twenty minutes of breathing and stretching on mats in the hall at the start of the school day, and a chant at the end of each practice: “I am not equal to my achievements or failures.” Of course, learners who felt these sessions went against their values or belief systems were allowed to sit outside.

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All prefect badges were taken away, the stage in the hall was levelled to the ground and, in an attempt to show how serious she was about “flattening the hierarchy”, Miss Newton whipped out her yoga mat and joined her students in the downward dog position on the floor.

In the classrooms, tiny safe boxes with timers were fixed to the desks. Pupils who felt it would improve their concentration could lock their phones inside for the duration of the period.

The school nurse did not feel comfortable – or qualified – having to work out individualised health plans, and she drew the line at microdosing. But Miss Newton just shrugged and went about her day creating safe spaces and setting up therapy groups led by senior students. In these sessions, participants were encouraged to talk about boundaries, red flags, gas-lighting, and childhood trauma.

The only problem with the radical changes she had implemented was that Miss Newton had no way of measuring their success. Around two per cent of students had left the school, but what she really cared about was the happiness of the remaining students. So she set about drawing up surveys, where participants could tick *Very Happy*, *Happy*, *Neutral*, *Sad*, or *Very Sad* boxes, all illustrated with the relevant emojis.

For *Sad* and *Very Sad* she left a writing space for students to motivate their answer because Miss Newton was interested to know whether and why any child could be very sad or even sad given that they were no longer burdened by tests or exams.

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Like most students, Trevor circled the *Neutral* emoji. He thought it would spare him the effort of having to motivate his choice, and at the same time it would show that he was not overly excited about the whole thing either.

While he did enjoy the yoga sessions – which came as a surprise, to be quite honest – none of the other changes really affected him. He would continue to wear the school uniform because his wardrobe did not allow for a different civvy outfit for every day of the week, and he did not own a cell phone to lock away in the new safe boxes. He had no plans of going to university, so it didn't really matter whether his marks were his own or that of a group.

Laura, on the other hand, circled *Very Sad*. While she didn't mind wearing her designer clothes to school, the fact that she had been dethroned as the netball captain really enraged her. *Angry* would be a more suitable emoji and she would go on to suggest it in the motivation box at the bottom of the form. A netball team really needed a captain to keep things under control. Plus, how did Miss Newton expect them to win against other schools if they kept shuffling the A team to give everyone a chance?

The only *Happy* feedback Miss Newton received was from an unexpected source. Brandon the Bully had finally seen the light and would become the poster child of what Miss Newton would consider her “success story” in years to come. While he was under no obligation to provide motivation for his high level of satisfaction on the form, Brandon was more than happy to describe it anyway: “The new system has given me an opportunity to do some introspection. I realise I have not

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been a good person. I was tearing down people who were doing better than me, thinking that if I pointed out their faults first, no one would notice mine. Now that we're all in the same boat and working towards the same goals, I don't see the point any more."

If Mandela High still had a prize-giving at the end of the year, former bully Brandon would be the first to receive a gold medal. But, instead, Miss Newton arranged for all the school's trophies and medals to be melted down and forged into big gold letters. These were arranged to form an ornate Newtonian mantra in the school foyer:

For every action there is
an equal but opposite reaction.