

Exploring the role of school assumptions and artefacts in building sustainable and prosperous secondary schools

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Abstract: This study explores how school assumptions and artefacts contribute to building sustainable and prosperous secondary schools. Guided by an interpretive paradigm and qualitative approach, a generic qualitative design was adopted, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six purposively selected participants, including the principal, deputy principal, departmental head, and teachers, from a consistently high-performing secondary school. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and meanings. The findings reveal that shared assumptions, particularly religion, equality, commitment, and professionalism, form the cultural bedrock of the school. These assumptions are not abstract ideals but are actively lived through daily practices, shaping leadership styles, staff relations, and learner engagement. Religion functions as a unifying spiritual force; equality fosters inclusivity and fairness, while professionalism sustains accountability and achievement. Tangible artefacts, including uniforms, sports, ceremonies, and logos, reinforce institutional identity, discipline, pride, and cohesion. By demonstrating how assumptions and artefacts interact to create a coherent cultural framework, the study offers a unique contribution to understanding the cultural dimensions of school sustainability, particularly in underexplored South African contexts. The study recommends embedding shared assumptions into school practices, leveraging artefacts purposefully, and fostering partnerships to strengthen sustainable school environments.

Keyword: Assumptions, artefacts, discipline, identity, school culture, sustainability

Introduction

A successful and sustainable school culture in secondary education is rooted in shared values, beliefs, and practices that shape the daily life of a school. Deal and Peterson (2016) define school culture as the collective norms and assumptions that influence relationships and decision-making. This culture plays a critical role in improving academic performance, fostering learner well-being, and promoting staff morale (Ambrose, 2021; Wuletu et al., 2024). School artefacts, such as logos, uniforms, and rituals, serve as symbolic representations of institutional identity, reinforcing values and behavioural expectations (Bamidele, 2022). Organisational theory underscores the importance of deeper, often implicit assumptions and the interaction between these and the school's leadership style, structures, and communication processes in sustaining an effective school environment (Schein, 2020; Liggett, 2024). Within the context of educational reform in South Africa, particularly post-apartheid, there is growing recognition that technical and curricular changes alone are insufficient; instead, transforming school culture is essential to

achieving meaningful, lasting improvement (Musaigwa, 2023).

School leadership is pivotal in cultivating and maintaining a culture that aligns with school goals. Leaders shape school climate through their values, vision, and everyday actions (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Their role is complemented by teachers who enact these values in classrooms and by learners, parents, and communities who reinforce and extend the cultural fabric (Muller & Kerbow, 2018). Distributed leadership practices and culturally grounded frameworks like Ubuntu have shown promise in enhancing school cohesion and inclusivity, particularly in marginalised South African communities (Ngubane & Makua, 2021; Tsayang et al., 2021). Principals who employ rituals, recognition, and inclusive engagement strategies contribute to a sense of belonging and purpose, which enhances teacher motivation, student achievement, and stakeholder involvement (Plaku & Leka, 2025). Thus, organisational culture, expressed through artefacts, assumptions, and leadership, remains a vital lever for building sustainable, effective secondary schools (Alzoueibi et al., 2025; Berhanu, 2025).

Despite various reforms aimed at improving school performance, many secondary schools, especially in under-resourced environments, continue to struggle with achieving sustainable success (Schaal et al., 2024). While policy efforts often emphasise curriculum, assessments, and infrastructure, they tend to neglect the critical influence of school culture on long-term improvement (Ambrose, 2021). There is limited scholarly understanding of how cultural elements such as artefacts, shared assumptions, and organisational traits like leadership and communication patterns shape and sustain school effectiveness (Schein, 2020; Eisenschmidt & Vanari, 2025). These dimensions are often overlooked despite their influence on stakeholder engagement and value transmission (Sipho & Mzokwana, 2024). As a result, interventions risk being superficial and fragmented if they ignore these foundational aspects of school life (Koh et al., 2023). There is thus a pressing need to shift focus from solely academic metrics to the cultural and organisational factors that underpin lasting school success.

The existing literature on sustainable school culture tends to emphasise leadership styles, curriculum, and external factors, while underexploring how internal organisational culture, especially school artefacts, assumptions, and symbolic practices, contributes to long-term sustainability. While studies by Sithole et al. (2020) and Gan and Alkaher (2021) underscore the role of organisational culture, community engagement, and leadership in supporting sustainable education, they often treat cultural components in abstract or isolated terms. There remains a notable gap in systematically examining how tangible artefacts (e.g., uniforms, logos), underlying assumptions (e.g., beliefs about discipline or inclusion), and organisational characteristics (e.g., leadership distribution, communication) interact to shape a coherent cultural system, particularly in secondary schools (Karingu et al., 2024). Furthermore, context-specific research grounded in postcolonial and developing country settings like South Africa is scarce, despite the recognition that cultural meanings and practices are socially and historically situated (Du Plessis, 2021; Seroto & Higgs, 2024). Consequently, dominant school improvement models may overlook how local values and symbolic expressions embedded in daily school life influence sustainable change. This points to the need for more integrated, empirically grounded research that examines the interrelationship of symbolic and structural elements of school culture, offering culturally responsive insights into fostering sustainable and transformative education. This study therefore draws primarily on Schein's (2020) organisational culture theory, which highlights the layered interaction between artefacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions, alongside culturally

responsive frameworks such as Ubuntu, to explain how symbolic and structural dimensions co-produce sustainable school culture. By anchoring the research in these theoretical perspectives, the study directly addresses the research gap by linking cultural factors, often underexplored in mainstream school effectiveness literature, to the broader project of building prosperous, resilient secondary schools.

This study aims to deepen understanding of how secondary schools cultivate and sustain a culture that promotes academic excellence and long-term viability. Recognising that sustainable school improvement goes beyond leadership or policy reforms, the research focuses on internal cultural dimensions, artefacts, belief systems, and organisational structures that shape school identity and everyday practices (Schein, 2020). By applying organisational and cultural theory lenses, it addresses a critical gap in educational research, shifting the focus from isolated variables to systemic cultural mechanisms that support school success (Tadesse Bogale & Debela, 2024). The findings are intended to inform school development policies and practices by identifying the cultural and structural foundations of effective schools, offering insights into how educational institutions can achieve both academic goals and long-term social transformation.

Research Aim: The aim of the study is to explore how school assumptions and artefacts interact within organisational culture to contribute to the sustainability and prosperity of secondary schools. This aim directly addresses the identified gap in the literature by examining the underexplored relationship between symbolic artefacts, implicit assumptions, and organisational practices, drawing on organisational and cultural theory to explain how these dimensions shape long-term school success.

Methods

This study adopts an interpretive paradigm, which focuses on the idea that people's subjective experiences provide the greatest understanding of reality, which is socially produced (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This paradigm emphasises meaning-making through participant viewpoints within their specific context. It is based on the idea that interactions between the researcher and the participant create knowledge. Interpretivists aim to understand the social world and need to engage the situation from the participant's point of view, recognising several interpretations as equally acceptable and that the results are generated (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014; Scott, 2017). This paradigm was essential for interpreting participants' experiences with artefacts and assumptions as characteristics of a successful school culture in a contextual and meaningful manner. This is particularly relevant to the study of school culture, as culture is not a fixed or universal phenomenon but a dynamic set of beliefs, assumptions, and practices shaped by the lived experiences of individuals within a specific school. An interpretive paradigm therefore allows the researcher to explore how participants construct meaning around school artefacts and assumptions in ways that sustain and enhance their institutional culture.

The research employs a qualitative approach to facilitate a deeper exploration of how participants' interview responses from their own experience and understanding of the characteristics of school culture in their own setting. A qualitative approach is particularly suited for this study, as it enables an in-depth understanding of the personal and lived experiences of individuals. It prioritises inductive thinking, detailed descriptions, and open-ended inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Naturalistic inquiry, adaptable design, and the significance of participant perspectives are important characteristics of a qualitative research approach (Tenny et

al., 2017). A qualitative approach aligns with the study's aim to explore how school artefacts, underlying assumptions, and organisational characteristics contribute to the development and sustainability of the school culture of successful secondary schools. This approach allows the researcher to gather significant, detailed narratives, which are crucial for understanding school artefacts, underlying assumptions, and organisational characteristics in a successful secondary school.

A generic qualitative design was adopted for the study, as it aims to uncover, understand, and interpret how people make meaning of their own lives or experiences (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). A general qualitative design provides the necessary flexibility considering the research question, which is wide and not based on a particular qualitative tradition. It allows for the collection and analysis of rich descriptions across a range of experiences, which is critical in understanding and exploring how school artefacts, underlying assumptions, and organisational characteristics contribute to the development and sustainability of the school culture of successful secondary schools. Purposive sampling, which is the selection of individuals with suitable experience that could provide the required information in a study, was adopted for this research (Patton, 2014). It is a non-probability sampling technique aimed at obtaining rich, information-rich cases. One successful secondary school whose academic performance has been consistent for the past decade was selected. The principal, one deputy principal, one departmental head, and three teachers who have been working in that particular school for at least three years were purposively selected to participate in the study. Purposive sampling ensures that participants have relevant experience with the phenomenon under study. The inclusion criteria ensured that participants had direct experience with the school's culture, practices, and values, making them best positioned to provide meaningful insights into the role of artefacts and assumptions. Although the sample size is relatively small (six participants), it is adequate for a qualitative interpretive study of this nature, where the focus is on depth rather than breadth. Small, information-rich samples enable in-depth engagement with participants' narratives, allowing the researcher to capture nuanced understandings of how school culture is sustained.

To collect data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected participants. This approach was selected because of its adaptability, which permits the researcher to investigate new issues while preserving a structured framework (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Semi-structured interviews were particularly suitable for this study, as they provided a balance between consistency across participants and flexibility to probe deeper into unique experiences. They allowed the researcher to explore complex cultural elements, such as values, beliefs, and assumptions, that are not easily accessible through structured questionnaires. This method encouraged participants to share rich narratives about how school artefacts and underlying assumptions contribute to a sustainable school culture, thereby generating data that was both detailed and contextually grounded. The semi-structured format encouraged participants to elaborate on their experiences on how school artefacts, underlying assumptions, and organisational characteristics contribute to the development and sustainability of the school culture of their school, enabling the researcher to capture a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Interview questions were there to give guidance to the conversation while allowing new topics to emerge from the participants' personal experiences. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the data. Each interview lasted approximately two hours, providing adequate time for participants to express their thoughts and feelings about their

experiences on how school artefacts, underlying assumptions, and organisational characteristics contribute to the development and sustainability of the school culture of successful secondary schools. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase model: familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, review, definition, and write-up. Thematic analysis is appropriate for a generic qualitative design and interpretivist paradigm, as it allows for the organisation and interpretation of participants' experiences in a structured manner. The researcher interpreted the findings within the interpretivist paradigm, ensuring that the lived experiences of participants were central to the analysis.

Result And Discussion

Result

The role of school assumptions in the development and sustainability of successful schools

1. Religion

Religion emerged as a significant underlying assumption shaping the school's culture, daily practices, and responses to challenges. Teacher Two emphasised the school's reliance on prayer as a spiritual response to perceived challenges: "*We believe so much in prayers. Whenever we have a problem in our school, such as spiritual attacks, we do invite pastors to come and pray. Thereafter, the situation gets calmer.*" The Departmental Head provided insight into how the school integrates community-based religious support structures: "*We invite the priests twice per year. We call women of prayer those mothers from various denominations. They come here offering prayers. When we reopen in January, they come; before exams, they come. And fortunately, they come to this school only, from the whole circuit.*" The participant also recalled a past spiritual crisis that required external intervention: "*Three years back we experienced a lot of challenges here. Our learners were just collapsing, only the Grade 12s, those who were mainly doing sciences and maths, until we reported the matter to the Zion Christian Church. The brass band came here with ministers to check what the problem was. They prayed for us, and since then, we have not experienced such things again.*" Teacher One highlighted how religious teachings are part of the school's routine and staff expectations: "*We believe in the word of God, which is the Bible. Every day on the assembly ground, teachers preach the word of God to the learners. If you are not the preaching type, another teacher will help you. We rarely have teachers who cannot preach in our school. We also have a Student Christian Organisation. We believe that prayer opens doors for everything.*" The principal illustrated how religious values influence leadership and relational dynamics within the school: "*I always tell them at the assembly point that I love them with all my heart, as the Bible says we ought to do. I love them like my biological children. I believe that is why they are able to respect me.*"

Religion plays a pivotal role as one of the underlying assumptions shaping the organisational culture and sustainability of the school. As the data reveals, religious beliefs, especially those rooted in Christianity, are not only a moral compass but also serve as a unifying force that guides the school's responses to crises and daily operations. The frequent reference to prayer, scripture, and religious interventions reflects what Newman et al. (2023) describes as deep assumptions, unconscious beliefs that shape how members interpret and respond to their environment. For example, the school's invitation of pastors and religious groups during critical periods (e.g., before exams or in response to perceived spiritual attacks) suggests that religion functions as a stabilising

and meaning-making structure during uncertainty. This aligns with research by Barker et al. (2023), who argue that values-based leadership in schools, often shaped by religious or cultural beliefs, fosters trust, discipline, and resilience among both staff and learners. Furthermore, the integration of religion into daily routines, such as morning assemblies led by teachers preaching scripture, and its use as a leadership tool by the principal to model love and care, supports the idea that religion contributes to building relational capital in schools. According to Al Halbusi et al. (2023), leadership grounded in moral authority, rather than bureaucratic control, enhances community cohesion and promotes shared values. The presence of a Student Christian Organisation and the communal support from local religious institutions reflect Epstein et al. (2025)'s theory of overlapping spheres of influence, where schools, families, and communities collaborate to support learner success. Thus, religion, as an embedded cultural and organisational assumption, not only shapes identity and collective purpose but also strengthens school resilience, learner engagement, and the emotional well-being of the school community, key indicators of sustainable and prosperous schooling.

2. Equality

Participants highlighted the school's foundational assumption of equality, which underpins its operations, relationships, and decision-making processes. This assumption manifests in practices that promote fairness, inclusivity, and unity among both learners and staff members. Teacher One explained that the school community embraces unity and rejects all forms of discrimination, stating, "*We are all the same; we don't discriminate against anyone irrespective of race, religion, or cultural or academic background. We do everything in unity. We have the assumption that "united we stand, divided we fall."*" Teacher Two provided insight into how equality is embedded in the assessment process, particularly when identifying top-performing learners: "*When we want to choose the best student in a grade, we don't base it on sentiment or bias. Each class brings its best learner, and the staff selects the top student using a checklist and set criteria. The learners know that we are very fair.*" The Departmental Head emphasised the school's culture of fairness among staff, where all teachers are treated equally: "*Favouritism is not practised at the school. All teachers are equal; the principal appreciates all of us. If one has done something wrong, we sit down as a family and solve the problems.*" The Deputy Principal reinforced the commitment to workload equity, stating, "*We share work equally amongst ourselves. No one can complain of work overload at the expense of others.*" Finally, Teacher Three shared that equality also extends to learners' freedom of choice, particularly in extracurricular activities: "*We believe that our learners should have the freedom to choose the sporting codes they want to participate in.*"

The assumption of equality, as highlighted in the data, plays a crucial role in fostering a sustainable and prosperous school environment. Equality in schools promotes fairness, inclusivity, and respect, values that are foundational to cohesive educational communities (Komatsu, 2024). Participants' testimonies reflect a school culture that actively rejects discrimination based on race, religion, or background, embracing unity as a guiding principle. This aligns with the views of Steenkamp (2021), who argues that inclusive school cultures grounded in equity contribute significantly to learners' sense of belonging and staff cohesion. The emphasis on fairness in assessments and learner recognition, as described by Teacher Two, demonstrates institutional commitment to procedural justice, which enhances trust, transparency, and learner motivation (Montenegro, 2020). Moreover, equality among staff and learners, including equitable workload distribution and freedom of choice in extracurricular activities, contributes to job satisfaction,

teacher retention, and learner engagement. According to Javornik and Mirazchiyski (2023), schools that value equity among staff members tend to have stronger collaborative cultures, which positively influence teaching effectiveness and student outcomes. The practice of non-hierarchical decision-making and conflict resolution, "we sit down as a family", as mentioned by the Departmental Head, reflects an Ubuntu-inspired leadership style rooted in mutual respect and shared responsibility (Ngubane & Makua, 2021; Tsayang et al., 2021). By embedding equality in everyday operations, the school not only cultivates a fair and empowering environment but also lays a strong foundation for long-term institutional sustainability and prosperity.

3. Commitment and professionalism

Participants emphasised that a strong culture of commitment and professionalism forms the foundation of their school's success. This shared belief among staff, leadership, and the broader school community contributes significantly to a sustainable and prosperous school environment. Teacher Three highlighted the collective mindset within the school, stating that the staff believe in "*unity, solidarity, commitment, and professionalism*," and that they "*share the same goals as a school*." This sense of unity underscores the collaborative ethos that drives teacher conduct and learner support. The principal elaborated on how this shared professionalism manifests in daily practices. He noted, "*Teachers know what is expected of them; teachers go to class without being pushed*," indicating a culture of intrinsic motivation and accountability. Teacher One reflected on the school's broader educational vision, explaining, "*We believe that we are planting the young children for a better future... showing them the light by preparing them for the future... through guidance in the classroom and through extracurricular and extramural activities*." This comment reflects how professionalism extends beyond academics to holistic learner development. The Departmental Head echoed this by stating that, "*In solidarity, we are committed to making sure that the learners reach their full potential*," attributing this success to collaborative effort and a shared sense of responsibility among the staff. Teacher Two further attributed the school's achievements to a collective culture of dedication, noting that, "*We have dedicated, disciplined, and committed teachers and learners, as well as supportive parents and other school community members*." This reveals that professionalism is not isolated to staff but includes learners and parents as active partners. The deputy principal described how commitment goes beyond the traditional school schedule. He shared that the school runs extended academic support: "*Our motto is 'six to six', meaning that our learners come to school at six o'clock in the morning and stay till six o'clock in the afternoon*." This extended timetable reflects a high level of dedication from both staff and learners. The principal provided an example of how professional practices are sustained and transferred: "*The new teachers are copying what the old teachers are doing... teachers go to school to teach even during the holidays, where they have a timetable to follow*." He further mentioned the involvement of the School Governing Body in policy development, noting that "*The SGB shows commitment by coming to meetings and being part of developing the school policies*," reinforcing that professionalism is modelled at all levels of the school.

The data reveals that commitment and professionalism are deeply embedded assumptions within the school culture, serving as crucial drivers for sustainability and prosperity in the secondary school context. Participants consistently referred to a shared ethos of unity, discipline, and intrinsic motivation, highlighting how staff and the broader school community collectively contribute to learner development and institutional success. This aligns with the findings of Hargreaves and Fullan (2015) and Gericke and Torbjörnsson (2022), who assert that professional

capital, comprised of individual competence, collaborative practices, and moral commitment, is fundamental to school improvement. The testimonies from the teachers and leadership illustrate how professionalism transcends formal duties to include holistic learner engagement, voluntary teaching during holidays, and extended academic support beyond regular hours. Such dedication demonstrates what Moloi (2019) described as moral professionalism, where educators see themselves as agents of social transformation. Moreover, the school's commitment culture extends beyond teachers to include learners, parents, and the School Governing Body, creating a unified front in achieving educational goals. The emphasis on modelling professional behaviour for new staff, collaborative policy development, and shared vision reflects Toikka and Tarnanen (2024) view of organisational culture, where deeply held assumptions shape behaviours and norms. The consistent reference to shared responsibility and high expectations mirrors Nadeem (2024)' assertion that sustainable school leadership promotes a culture of commitment through distributed roles and community engagement. Ultimately, the school's success is rooted in its ability to foster a professional learning community where commitment is not imposed but collectively embraced and practised at all levels, making the institution resilient, adaptable, and forward-looking.

The role of school artefacts and assumptions in the development and sustainability of successful schools

1. School uniform

Participants highlighted the symbolic and functional significance of the school uniform in shaping the identity, culture, and discipline of the school. The uniform was perceived not only as a dress code but also as a key artefact that fosters unity, pride, and adherence to school values. Teacher One emphasised the uniqueness and symbolic meaning of the school uniform, stating, “*Our policy is that all learners must wear the school uniform every day. The colours of the school are green and gold, trimmed with red. I heard the first principal chose these colours because they were the colours of his church, the Zionist church. Everyone supported the idea. The colours symbolise discipline, and learners are not allowed to mix it with any other clothes.*” Teacher Three also elaborated on the distinctiveness and recognition of the school uniform: “*The uniform is very unique in terms of colours; they are different from other schools in the circuit. What is most interesting is that learners like it and wear it correctly. Most schools admire our uniform, and even some universities recognise it during career exhibitions. It symbolises discipline and can be seen from far away.*” The Departmental Head reinforced the pride associated with the school uniform: “*Just come here during the day, and you'll see that our uniform is the best and most beautiful. Our learners even go to town wearing it because it is recognised as the best in the province.*” Teacher Two highlighted the school's firm stance on maintaining the dress code: “*Our learners use it regularly as it is. They are not allowed to mix it with jeans or any other attire.*” Additionally, Teacher One shared how the school supports learners with uniform-related challenges: “*On Mondays, all learners are expected to wear tunics. If a learner has a problem, like losing theirs, they report it to the teachers instead of being sent home.*”

The school uniform emerges as a powerful artefact in building sustainable and prosperous secondary schools by fostering a shared identity, discipline, and pride among learners. As highlighted by the participants, the uniform is not merely a dress code but a symbolic representation of the school's culture and values. This aligns with Durkheim (2004)'s theory on collective consciousness, where shared symbols like uniforms contribute to social cohesion and a sense of belonging within a community. The deliberate choice of colours linked to the school's historical and cultural background, as Teacher One noted, strengthens this symbolism, reinforcing

discipline and unity, which are foundational for a positive learning environment (Kaplan & Bista, 2022; Sabic-El-Rayess et al., 2020). Moreover, the uniqueness and recognisability of the uniform, as described by Teacher Three and the Departmental Head, further enhance the school's reputation and learners' pride, which can motivate students and improve school morale (Cain, 2024; Raudys, 2018). Functionally, the uniform enforces adherence to school policies and reduces distractions related to personal attire, which is essential for maintaining order and focus in schools (Evans & Ngatia, 2021). The school's proactive approach to managing uniform challenges, such as supporting learners who lose their tunics rather than excluding them, reflects an inclusive and nurturing school culture that contributes to learner retention and well-being (Ansari et al., 2022). This practical support underscores the uniform's role beyond symbolism; it is a daily tool for promoting discipline and equality, reducing socioeconomic disparities among learners (Hein Jr, 2020). Together, these insights affirm that school uniforms, as artefacts, play a critical role in shaping school identity, discipline, and community, all of which are crucial elements for building sustainable and thriving secondary schools.

2. Sports

Sports emerged as a vital school artefact contributing to the development of sustainable and prosperous secondary schools. Participants highlighted how active involvement in sports not only enhances learner participation and achievement but also raises the school's profile locally and internationally. The principal emphasised the school's strong reputation in athletics and sports participation: "*In sports, we have learners who are able to reach the national level. As we are speaking, I have got learners who have gone to Port Elizabeth as far as athletics is concerned. We are well known for sport in our district.*" He further noted that participation in formal competitions brings recognition and motivation to learners: "*We are able to register with the Motsepe Foundation competition and others, where our learners compete with other schools and win. We get trophies and certificates in sports year in and year out.*" The Deputy Principal highlighted the broader impact of sports on both the school and staff, including international exposure: "*Our school has been representing the province in different codes at national and even international levels. With basketball, we've travelled to the USA, Brazil, Italy, and other African countries. Because of our success, Mr X, the former principal, was appointed as the president of basketball in South Africa.*" He also noted how sports can serve as a platform for learners who may struggle academically: "*We have seen that if they are not performing well in class, they can perform better in sports.*" Teacher Two shared that sports foster unity and collaboration among staff and learners: "*Our children participate in athletics and sports; all of us, including educators, are involved. The principal even comes to support and check on us.*" Teacher Three described how sports are timetabled and inclusive: "*We have sports on Wednesdays where learners are given a chance to participate in athletics and other sporting codes of their choice.*" She also acknowledged resource limitations while highlighting active engagement in key sports: "*We have a number of sports, though some are not very active due to a lack of resources. However, soccer, netball, basketball, rugby, and chess are the main games we actively participate in.*"

Sports, as a prominent school artefact, play a pivotal role in shaping sustainable and prosperous secondary schools by enhancing learner engagement, fostering school identity, and promoting holistic development. The data reveal that sports not only encourage participation and achievement among learners but also significantly elevate the school's reputation both locally and internationally. This aligns with Ambrose (2021) assertion that school artefacts such as sports contribute to institutional culture, discipline, and learner motivation. The principal's reference to national-level achievements and participation in prestigious competitions such as the Motsepe

Foundation indicates that success in sports can lead to institutional recognition and inspire learners toward excellence. Moreover, international engagements through basketball, highlighted by the deputy principal, illustrate how sports can be leveraged as a platform for global exposure and leadership development, as supported by Milambo and Pacho (2021), who argue that sport-based programmes in schools foster intercultural understanding and civic responsibility. Furthermore, sports serve as an inclusive tool for social cohesion and personal growth, especially for learners who may not excel academically. This is echoed by Thompson et al. (2022), who contend that sports in schools provide alternative pathways for success and inclusion, helping learners develop self-esteem, teamwork, and resilience. The comments from teachers show that sports are timetabled, inclusive, and supported by educators and leadership alike, reinforcing the idea that a shared sporting culture strengthens unity among staff and learners (Kang et al., 2024). Despite some challenges with resources, the active engagement in core sporting codes like soccer, rugby, and chess reflects a commitment to offering diverse opportunities. Overall, sports, as a dynamic artefact, not only enrich the educational experience but also contribute to school sustainability by nurturing learner talent, strengthening school-community relations, and building institutional pride.

3. Ceremonies

Ceremonies play a significant role in promoting a sense of identity, belonging, and motivation among learners and staff. Participants highlighted various events embedded in the school calendar that celebrate learner achievement, cultural heritage, and school unity. The principal explained that cultural ceremonies are institutionalised: "*We participate in cultural day activities as stipulated in our year plan.*" The deputy principal elaborated on the cultural celebrations, stating, "*We are having a cultural day in September for our learners to show all their cultural heritage.*" Similarly, the Departmental Head highlighted the community's involvement in these events: "*Every September, two days before we close, we used to have a very big function where we can slaughter one or more cows, and we celebrate with the parents and the community in terms of cultural day.*" Teacher One described how learners actively participate in showcasing their cultural identity: "*Our children are participating in cultural dances—some Dinaka (Pedi cultural dance for males), Mapadi (for females), Mapantsula (a modern dance), and the school choir.*" Teacher Three noted the learners' enthusiasm in expressing themselves: "*They wear traditional attire of some kind and even other items the learners can think of... they want to show us what they are best at.*" In addition to cultural events, the school hosts ceremonies that mark important academic and social milestones. The principal mentioned, "*After spring classes, we have a matric dance where we say farewell to our learners.*" The Deputy Principal added that academic achievement is rewarded during such events: "*Our best learner is given a laptop, or we pay some part of the matric dance fee. Our educators donate money for the best learner toward his/her university programme.*"

Teacher One further noted a shift towards more meaningful rewards: "*For the past two years, we changed from the cow; we replaced it with the laptop so that it can help the learners with their academic work, more especially when they go to university.*" Welcoming ceremonies also form part of the school's culture. The Deputy Principal shared, "*In January, we have something like a fresher's ball to welcome all the grade 8 learners. We make a big party, especially in the second week of February around Valentine's Day.*" Similarly, Teacher Three confirmed the importance of this ritual: "*We do have the opening day ceremony, especially for the grade 8s because they are new to our school. We use the forum to welcome them.*" Another major event is the annual cultural celebration. Teacher Three explained, "*In our celebration of culture, the last Thursday before the end of the third term, we have Mr. and Ms. X, the first and second princesses, and supporting*

teams who win nice things like a flat screen TV, microwave, and 18-piece cookware sets.” The Departmental Head emphasised that academic excellence is also recognised during these ceremonies: “*During cultural day or matric farewell, we also give learners and teachers awards for academic performance per learning area.*” Teacher One echoed this sentiment: “*We give certificates for the best-performing learners and teachers in all the subjects. We allow our learners to show us their talent.*”

The data presented underscores the critical role ceremonies play as school artefacts in cultivating a sustainable and prosperous secondary school environment. Ceremonies, ranging from cultural celebrations to academic recognition events, not only reinforce the school’s identity and traditions but also promote a sense of belonging, pride, and motivation among learners and staff. Cultural events, such as the annual “Cultural Day”, serve as symbolic artefacts that embody the values and collective memory of the school community, fostering social cohesion and intergenerational engagement (Streeter, 2025). As revealed in the participants’ accounts, these ceremonies are institutionalised and embedded in the school calendar, affirming the school’s commitment to cultural preservation and learner inclusivity. Such practices resonate with Ismail et al. (2022) argument that ceremonies and rituals reflect and shape school culture, strengthening internal unity and encouraging stakeholder participation. Furthermore, academic and social ceremonies, such as matric farewells, awards presentations, and fresher’s welcome events, serve as motivational artefacts that recognise effort, celebrate excellence, and encourage future achievement. These ceremonies, often marked by symbolic rewards like laptops, certificates, or public recognition, contribute to building a high-performance culture while fostering learners’ emotional connection to the school (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). Participants’ emphasis on meaningful rewards and community involvement suggests that these events go beyond mere celebration; they act as platforms for modelling the school’s aspirations and reinforcing positive behaviours. In line with Plaku and Leka (2025) and Feriana and Ulfatun (2024) view on sustainable educational change, such ceremonies create shared meaning, develop learner agency, and contribute to a positive, resilient school climate where learners and teachers are inspired to thrive. Therefore, ceremonies, as artefactual elements of school culture, are not peripheral but central to sustaining institutional prosperity and learner success.

4. Logo

The data reveals how the school logo functions not merely as a visual identifier but as a potent artefact that encapsulates the institution’s identity, values, and aspirations, thus contributing to a sustainable and prosperous school culture. The Departmental Head highlighted the strategic visibility of the school logo across the institution’s environment. They stated, “*When you enter the school, there is a place where the school logo is displayed. The logo is also on the school uniform; you even find it on a tie. It appears on the letterhead, and you’ll find it on all official correspondence.*” This indicates how the school logo functions as a consistent and formal identifier of the school’s presence, both internally and externally. The Deputy Principal drew attention to the school motto embedded in the logo, stating, “*On the logo of our school, the motto ‘Endure and Succeed’ is written.*” This motto reflects the school’s core values and provides motivational direction for learners and staff alike. The principal offered a rich, symbolic interpretation of the logo, emphasising its cultural, historical, and educational significance. They explained, “*The crocodile you see on our school logo is a totem representing the Bakwena tribe. The school is located in an area under the traditional authority of the Bakwena, and the crocodile symbolises their history and victory; it shows that they fought and won to be where they are today. The image of the crocodile with its mouth open implies readiness, strength, and resilience.*” The principal further elaborated on

other symbolic elements: “*The logo also features three aloe vera-shaped plants with thorns, which are known for their medicinal properties. This plant survives drought and symbolises toughness, healing, and the ability to thrive in adversity. For us, it represents being untouchable, victorious, and resilient, qualities we nurture in our learners.*” In addition to cultural symbolism, the principal noted the inclusion of the school's abbreviation and how all elements rest on the platform bearing the motto ‘*Endure and Succeed*’. They concluded, “*Each part of the logo influences our daily practices. We uphold these principles with dedication; it works like a miracle for us. I believe if other schools developed such a culture and belief system, it would work for them too.*”

As evidenced by the Departmental Head's and Deputy Principal's statements, the strategic placement of the logo across uniforms, correspondence, and signage ensures a consistent institutional presence. This aligns with Edelmann's (2018) idea of symbolic boundaries, where visual artefacts such as logos demarcate identity and foster unity. The inclusion of the motto “*Endure and Succeed*” exemplifies how artefacts carry motivational and philosophical meaning, guiding both behaviour and school ethos (Di-Finizio, 2022). Through repeated visual exposure, the logo reinforces shared values and expectations among learners and staff, enhancing a cohesive and purposeful school environment. The principal's interpretation underscores the deep cultural, historical, and aspirational significance embedded within the logo's symbols, such as the crocodile (a Bakwena tribal totem) and the aloe vera plant. These elements resonate with the local community's heritage, reflecting what Walid and Malik (2023) refer to as the “symbolic integration” of school culture, where artefacts reinforce collective memory and identity. The crocodile symbolises strength, resilience, and readiness, while the aloe plant denotes endurance and healing, qualities the school seeks to instil in its learners. By linking school artefacts to indigenous symbols and lived realities, the school fosters cultural pride, relevance, and emotional attachment, which, according to Banda et al. (2024), are essential for building a committed and values-driven school community. Thus, the school logo operates as a powerful artefact, shaping daily practices, reinforcing shared values, and contributing to institutional sustainability.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the sustainability and prosperity of the school under study are deeply rooted in shared assumptions, particularly religion, equality, and professionalism, and reinforced by visible artefacts such as uniforms, ceremonies, sports, and the school logo. These findings underscore the argument made by Schein (2020) that sustainable organisational cultures rely on the interplay between underlying assumptions and tangible artefacts that give expression to shared values. What makes this case distinctive is the way religious and cultural traditions are embedded in daily practice and leadership, providing stability and collective meaning in the face of challenges.

While the prominence of religious and cultural assumptions is clearly evident, their role must be understood within the specific South African educational context. The school's reliance on prayer, religious ceremonies, and cultural events reflects the persistence of community-rooted practices in a setting where faith-based values continue to provide moral authority and cohesion. This aligns with Barker et al. (2023), who highlight the importance of values-based leadership for building trust and resilience in schools. At the same time, these assumptions intersect with modern educational practices in ways that could be further leveraged. For instance, ceremonies that once focused on symbolic rewards, such as livestock, have shifted toward more practical tools such as laptops, signalling an evolving integration of cultural traditions with technological advancement.

Similarly, extended academic support (“six to six” schooling) and recognition awards demonstrate how deeply rooted cultural values can coexist with modern strategies to enhance learner outcomes. Future efforts could build on this intersection by explicitly integrating digital learning technologies and 21st-century skills training into cultural and religious frameworks, ensuring that tradition and innovation reinforce rather than conflict with each other.

The artefacts identified, uniforms, sports, ceremonies, and logos, also reveal how visible symbols can serve as powerful vehicles for shaping learner identity and institutional reputation. The school’s distinct uniform and culturally rooted logo embody Durkheim’s (2004) notion of collective consciousness, while the success of its sports programme reflects Ambrose’s (2021) claim that artefacts contribute to institutional pride and cohesion. However, these artefacts also play a developmental role by motivating learners, strengthening community ties, and creating pathways for recognition beyond academic achievement (Thompson et al., 2022). Thus, the findings reinforce arguments in the literature (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Plaku & Leka, 2025) that artefacts are not peripheral but central to the cultivation of resilient and inclusive school cultures.

This study also contributes to ongoing debates about the role of school culture in education reform, particularly in contexts where material resources are limited. Much of the existing literature tends to foreground leadership or curriculum reforms (Sithole et al., 2020; Gan & Alkaher, 2021), while neglecting the symbolic and cultural foundations that underpin long-term success. By foregrounding assumptions such as religion, equality, and professionalism, this study illustrates that cultural resources can serve as equally powerful drivers of sustainability as financial or infrastructural investments. In doing so, it challenges technocratic models of school improvement that marginalise cultural and symbolic dimensions, echoing calls from scholars such as Du Plessis (2021) and Seroto and Higgs (2024) for more contextually grounded approaches to educational change.

Thus, the case of this school illustrates that sustainable and prosperous educational environments are built on the synergy between enduring cultural assumptions and adaptive modern practices. Religious faith and cultural heritage provide a moral and symbolic foundation, while artefacts and evolving practices integrate these traditions with contemporary educational needs. This dynamic interaction suggests that schools seeking long-term sustainability should neither abandon their cultural and spiritual roots nor uncritically adopt modern reforms. Instead, they should purposefully weave the two together, creating culturally grounded yet forward-looking school cultures that foster resilience, identity, and achievement.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how school assumptions and artefacts contribute to building sustainable and prosperous secondary schools. The findings affirm that deeply embedded assumptions, such as religious faith, equality, and professionalism, form the bedrock of a resilient school culture. These assumptions are not abstract ideals but are actively lived through the daily practices, beliefs, and attitudes of teachers, learners, and school leaders. Religion serves as a unifying spiritual force that guides behaviour and offers emotional support in times of crisis. Equality, in turn, manifests in inclusive practices that ensure fairness and foster unity among staff and learners. The shared commitment to professionalism and excellence among all school stakeholders sustains a culture of responsibility, achievement, and high morale. In parallel, the

study reveals how tangible school artefacts, such as the uniform, logo, ceremonies, and sports, operate as powerful symbols and practices that reinforce institutional identity, pride, and cohesion. The school uniform fosters discipline and pride, the logo encapsulates cultural heritage and resilience, and ceremonies serve as communal spaces for recognition and celebration. Sports offer learners an outlet for personal development and elevate the school's local and international profile. Together, these assumptions and artefacts create a coherent cultural framework that supports long-term success. Thus, the study concludes that sustainable and prosperous secondary schools are not solely built on policies and curricula but on the powerful synergy between shared values and symbolic artefacts. When deliberately nurtured and strategically deployed, these elements shape not only the school's identity but also the attitudes, aspirations, and achievements of its members. Schools aiming to cultivate enduring success should therefore invest in cultivating strong assumptions and leveraging artefacts that embody their collective ethos. Based on the study, future research could investigate how these cultural assumptions and artefacts evolve across diverse school contexts, such as rural versus urban environments, or in schools facing resource constraints. Comparative studies across different regions or education systems may also reveal whether certain assumptions and artefacts hold universal value or are context-specific. In addition, longitudinal research could provide insights into how these cultural elements influence learner outcomes and institutional resilience over time. Such enquiries would extend the relevance of this study, offering policymakers, school leaders, and educators a richer evidence base for cultivating sustainable and prosperous educational environments.

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