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What if every school had a symbolic artefact that told its story?

The Object as Oracle: Reclaiming Memory Through Meaning

Author: Vernon Dickason

Opening Reflection

Every school has a story, etched in corridors, whispered in assemblies, carried in the hearts of those who pass through its gates. But what if that story were made visible? What if, by 2030, every South African school had a symbolic artefact, a crafted object, installation or ritual, that embodied its journey, values and vision? Not as decoration, but as declaration. Not as nostalgia, but as narrative.

The Scenario

By 2030, the Department of Basic Education, in partnership with the Department of Arts and Culture, launches the School Symbolic Heritage Programme (SSHP). Each school is invited to co-create a symbolic artefact that reflects its identity, history and aspirations. These artefacts include:

- Sculptures or mosaics made from reclaimed materials, telling stories of resilience
- Story poles or memory walls inscribed with learner reflections and community milestones
- Ceremonial objects used in rites of passage, assemblies or restorative circles
- Digital artefacts, interactive timelines, oral histories or virtual exhibitions

Artefacts are co-designed by learners, educators, alumni and local artists. They are unveiled in annual “Day of Story” ceremonies, where schools reflect on their past and recommit to their future. Some artefacts become pilgrimage points for alumni, others evolve with each generation. The initiative fosters pride, belonging and intergenerational dialogue. However, some schools struggle with funding, facilitation and symbolic literacy.

What It Reveals

This scenario reveals the power of symbolic narrative in institutional life. Artefacts are not just objects, they are oracles. They hold memory, meaning and momentum.

It also exposes the absence of ritual in many schools, where identity is often implicit, but rarely embodied.

From a systems-thinking lens, symbolic artefacts offer a way to anchor culture in form, making the invisible visible, and the intangible tangible.

Why It Matters

South African schools carry layered histories, of struggle, triumph, silence and song. A symbolic artefact affirms that these stories matter. It invites learners to see themselves as part of a living legacy. It transforms the school from a building into a beacon.

Philosophically, this scenario touches on ritual theory, narrative identity, and Ubuntu aesthetics. It asks us to honour the soul of the school, not just its syllabus.

Reflective Responses

What does a symbolic artefact look like in practice?

It looks like a mosaic of broken desks turned into a phoenix. A staff carved with the names of every headmaster. A digital archive of learner poems. It means form infused with story.

How do we ensure artefacts are inclusive and meaningful?

By co-creating across generations, honouring multiple narratives, and embedding reflection into the process. By treating the artefact as a living symbol, not a static emblem.

What risks emerge if symbolism is neglected or imposed?

Cultural erasure, disengagement and shallow representation. Without authenticity, artefacts become ornaments, not anchors.

Sidebar: Facts and Philosophy

Insights from South African Cultural Education (2023–2025):

- The Schooling 2030 Action Plan calls for stronger school identity, cultural inclusion and community engagement
- The Symbolic Narratives study by Van Zyl and Sabiescu explores how symbolic meaning shapes educational technology adoption in South African schools
- The Cultural Symbols and Schools Act case study highlights the constitutional importance of cultural expression in school governance

“The artefact is not the story, it is the invitation. It calls us to remember, to reflect, and to reimagine.” - <i>Prof. Njabulo Ndebele</i>
