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# Reforming basic education in South Africa: Socio-political implications of the BELA Bill

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### ABSTRACT

*Education remains a cornerstone of sustainable development and social equity, particularly in post-apartheid South Africa, where historical disparities in access and quality persist. The Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Bill introduces wide-ranging reforms, including the compulsory introduction of Grade R, regulation of school admissions and language policies, formalisation of homeschooling, and a complete prohibition of corporal punishment. These reforms aim to enhance fairness and inclusivity but raise critical questions regarding constitutional rights, cultural diversity, and the socio-political feasibility of implementation. This article critically analyses the BELA Bill within an international context, drawing on comparative insights from multilingual and education-forward countries such as Canada, Finland, Norway, and New Zealand. Through a qualitative review of policy documents, academic literature, and case studies, the study identifies opportunities and challenges in implementing the bill's provisions. The analysis highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement, capacity building, and robust monitoring frameworks to ensure successful reform. Aligning with global trends in education transformation, the BELA Bill presents an opportunity to redefine South Africa's education system as more inclusive, equitable, and responsive to societal needs. However, the realisation of these goals will depend on pragmatic, context-sensitive implementation that accounts for South Africa's diverse linguistic and cultural landscape.*

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## Introduction

Education reform in South Africa is an essential component of the country's efforts to address entrenched inequalities and create pathways for socio-economic mobility. Since the end of apartheid in 1994, the government has implemented several measures aimed at improving access to education for all learners. However, significant disparities persist. These inequalities are deeply rooted in historical injustices, which have left a legacy of uneven resource allocation, infrastructure development, and learning outcomes between historically advantaged and disadvantaged schools (Spaull, 2019).

Schools in rural and township areas are disproportionately affected, often lacking qualified teachers, adequate learning materials, and essential facilities such as libraries and laboratories (Department of Basic Education, 2023). This has resulted in poor educational outcomes, particularly among learners from marginalised communities, and has contributed to broader socio-economic challenges such as high unemployment and income inequality.

The Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Bill, introduced by the Department of Basic Education in 2023, seeks to address these systemic challenges. The bill proposes a series of targeted reforms, including making Grade R compulsory for all learners,

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regulating homeschooling, prohibiting corporal punishment, and enhancing government oversight of school admissions and language policies (Government of South Africa, 2024). By prioritising inclusivity, fairness, and quality, the BELA Bill aligns with South Africa's constitutional mandate to ensure the right to basic education for all learners (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996).

In this context, the BELA Bill represents a bold step toward addressing the structural barriers that hinder educational access and quality. However, despite the growing body of literature on education policy and inequality in South Africa, few studies have rigorously assessed the socio-political feasibility of implementing such centralised reforms. This paper aims to fill this critical research gap by examining the potential and limitations of the BELA Bill in practice.

The BELA Bill's significance lies in its potential to transform the education landscape by addressing long-standing barriers to equity and inclusivity. Internationally, similar reforms have proven effective in fostering greater access to quality education and promoting social cohesion. For instance, Canada's bilingual education policies have played a crucial role in ensuring equitable access to education in a multicultural society, while Finland's early childhood education initiatives have demonstrated the far-reaching benefits of investing in foundational learning (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021).

In the South African context, linguistic and cultural diversity present unique challenges and opportunities. Research indicates that mother-tongue instruction in early education is critical for improving cognitive development and academic performance, particularly for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (Madiba, 2013). However, ensuring the effective implementation of mother-tongue education requires substantial investments in teacher training, curriculum development, and instructional materials.

The regulation of language policies under the BELA Bill also has implications for social cohesion and national unity. By promoting inclusive policies that reflect the country's linguistic diversity, the bill has the potential to bridge historical divides and create a sense of belonging among all learners. Additionally, the emphasis on compulsory early childhood education aligns with global trends, highlighting the role of foundational learning in supporting lifelong development and socio-economic advancement (Sibanda & Tshehla, 2025).

This article aims to critically evaluate the BELA Bill in the context of South Africa's unique socio-political and educational landscape. The analysis draws on international best practices to provide insights into the potential benefits and challenges associated with the bill's implementation. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- i. Assess the alignment of the BELA Bill's provisions with global trends in education reform.
- ii. Identify key opportunities and challenges in implementing the bill's reforms.
- iii. Propose evidence-based strategies to ensure the bill's success.

## **Methodology**

The methodology includes a qualitative review of policy documents, recent academic literature, and case studies from comparable contexts. By examining the experiences of countries such as Finland, Canada, and Norway, the study provides lessons that can inform the effective implementation of the BELA Bill in South Africa. Additionally, the analysis incorporates perspectives from educational experts and practitioners to provide a nuanced understanding of the bill's socio-political implications (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021).

The paper is organised into five sections. Section 2 explores theoretical and empirical foundations of education reform, focusing on decolonisation, cultural identity, and methodologies for analysing the BELA Bill. Section 3 examines the historical evolution of South Africa's education system, the apartheid legacy, and the symbolic significance of reforms. Section 4 discusses challenges, opportunities, and broader implications of the BELA Bill, emphasising capacity building, stakeholder engagement, and policy design. Section 5 concludes with recommendations for sustained investment, monitoring, and leveraging global best practices for successful implementation.

## **South Africa's Education Landscape**

### **Historical Context and Challenges**

South Africa's education system remains deeply influenced by the inequalities entrenched during the apartheid era. Under apartheid, education was deliberately stratified to disadvantage black South Africans, resulting in a system that provided inferior resources, facilities, and opportunities to the majority population. While significant strides have been made to redress these injustices since 1994, disparities in access to quality education persist (Spaull, 2019).

Currently, over 70% of learners in South Africa attend schools classified as under-resourced or "no-fee" schools, which cater to low-income communities. These schools often face severe challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, insufficient infrastructure, and a lack of adequately trained teachers. For instance, many rural and township schools operate without libraries, laboratories, or access to modern technology, exacerbating educational inequalities (Madiba, 2013).

Additionally, socio-economic factors such as poverty and unemployment further hinder educational attainment. Research indicates that learners from impoverished households are more likely to drop out of school due to financial pressures, poor academic performance, or a lack of support systems (Gustafsson & Taylor, 2022). These challenges contribute to South Africa's high dropout rates, with less than half of learners who begin Grade 1 ultimately completing Grade 12.

The legacy of apartheid is also evident in language policies. Schools previously designated for white learners often continue to have better resources and higher academic outcomes, while those serving black learners struggle to meet basic educational standards. This disparity highlights the ongoing need for reforms such as those proposed under the BELA Bill (Sibanda & Tshehla, 2025).

### **Current Reforms and Global Comparisons**

The BELA Bill represents a transformative initiative designed to address these systemic challenges. By introducing reforms that advance equity, broaden access, and enhance educational standards, the bill seeks to align South Africa's education system with global best practices. These reforms are particularly significant in the context of early childhood education, homeschooling regulation, and the standardisation of language and admissions policies.

### **Case Study Justification**

The selection of international case studies, including Finland, Canada, Norway, Germany, and Australia, was deliberate. Finland and Canada were chosen for their inclusive, multilingual education systems that reflect the type of linguistic and cultural diversity present in South Africa. Norway and Australia offer valuable insights into early childhood development and homeschooling regulation, respectively, while Germany provides a model of stringent but balanced homeschooling oversight. These cases were selected for their relevance in addressing challenges similar to those confronting South Africa's education system, and for the success of their policy frameworks in promoting educational equity.

### **Analytical Approach**

This article adopts a qualitative thematic analysis of primary policy documents, comparative education literature, and selected international case studies. Themes were derived inductively and clustered around three focal areas: (1) equity and access, (2) policy implementation challenges, and (3) stakeholder engagement and accountability. These themes provided the analytical lens for assessing the BELA Bill's potential effectiveness and its alignment with global reform trends.

### **Early Childhood Education**

One of the central provisions of the BELA Bill is the introduction of compulsory Grade R for all children aged four to five years. This reform underlines the importance of early childhood education (ECE) as a foundation for cognitive, emotional, and social development. International evidence strongly supports the long-term benefits of ECE. For example, Norway's universal pre-primary education programme has been credited with reducing developmental gaps and enhancing greater social fairness. By ensuring that

all children, regardless of socio-economic background, have access to quality early learning opportunities, Norway has improved overall educational outcomes and reduced inequality (Sello et al., 2024).

In South Africa, however, the effective implementation of compulsory Grade R will require significant investments in infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum development. Research indicates that early childhood educators in under-resourced areas often lack the qualifications and support needed to deliver quality instruction (Heckman, 2011). Addressing these gaps will be critical to realising the potential benefits of this reform.

### **Home-schooling Regulation**

The BELA Bill's emphasis on regulating homeschooling reflects a growing global trend toward ensuring quality and accountability in alternative education models. Homeschooling has become increasingly popular among middle-class families in South Africa, partly due to concerns about the quality of public education. However, the lack of oversight has raised questions about the consistency and quality of education provided in these settings (Department of Basic Education, 2018).

Countries such as Germany and Australia provide valuable examples of how homeschooling can be effectively regulated. In Germany, homeschooling is strictly monitored, with parents required to follow the national curriculum and participate in regular assessments to ensure that educational standards are met. Similarly, Australia has implemented robust registration and monitoring processes, allowing for greater accountability while respecting parental autonomy (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2020). These frameworks demonstrate the potential for South Africa to balance flexibility with quality assurance in its approach to homeschooling under the BELA Bill.

### **Language and Admissions Policies**

The BELA Bill also seeks to regulate school language and admissions policies to promote inclusivity and equitable access. Language remains a contentious issue in South African education, where linguistic diversity is both a strength and a challenge. While mother-tongue instruction has been shown to improve learning outcomes, particularly in early education, implementing this policy on a national scale requires significant resources and careful planning (Madiba, 2013).

Globally, countries like Canada have successfully integrated bilingual education policies to accommodate linguistic diversity while ensuring all learners can participate meaningfully in the education system. Canada's approach allows for instruction in English and French, with additional support for learners from immigrant or indigenous backgrounds. By prioritising inclusivity and tailoring policies to local contexts, Canada has created a model that South Africa can draw upon in implementing its own language reforms.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The BELA Bill introduces several key reforms aimed at transforming South Africa's education system by promoting equal opportunity, encouraging diverse access, and raising learning standards. These provisions are rooted in the need to address historical disparities while aligning with international best practices in education. This section presents each provision, related international experiences, and implications for South Africa's education stakeholders.

### **Language and Admissions Policies**

Language and school admissions have long been sensitive topics in South Africa, reflecting the country's complex socio-political history. The BELA Bill seeks to regulate these policies by centralising oversight under the Department of Basic Education (DBE). This reform aims to dismantle barriers to access, particularly for learners from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, who have often faced exclusion from well-resourced schools due to restrictive admission criteria or language policies.

### **Language Policies**

Language remains a significant factor in educational access and inclusion. Research consistently shows that learners perform better when taught in their mother tongue during the foundational years (Madiba, 2013). However, the challenge in South Africa lies in

balancing the promotion of mother-tongue instruction with the practicalities of implementing multilingual education in a linguistically diverse country.

Internationally, multilingual education models provide valuable frameworks. In Canada, bilingual policies ensure access to education in either English or French, with added support for minority languages. Similarly, India's three-language formula integrates regional, national, and international languages into the curriculum, promoting inclusivity while preserving linguistic diversity (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2020). These models offer South Africa workable solutions for enhancing linguistic inclusivity through scalable and adaptable strategies.

### **Admissions Policies**

The regulation of school admissions under the BELA Bill aims to ensure that all learners have a fair opportunity to attend well-resourced schools, regardless of socio-economic background. Standardising these policies is a step toward eliminating exclusionary practices and fostering racial and economic integration.

However, potential opposition from affluent or former Model C schools is a real challenge. These schools may resist the centralisation of admissions, viewing it as a threat to autonomy or quality. To mitigate this, the DBE must proactively engage in stakeholder dialogues with school governing bodies, parents, and communities to build consensus, clarify objectives, and alleviate concerns.

### **International Insight**

In Finland, school admissions are largely based on geographic location rather than selective criteria, supporting inclusivity and reducing segregation (OECD, 2021). This model offers a valuable lesson for South Africa in balancing fairness with practical enrolment logistics.

### **Compulsory Early Childhood Education**

One of the most significant provisions of the BELA Bill is the introduction of compulsory Grade R for all children aged four to five years. This reform affirms the global recognition of early childhood education (ECE) as a foundation for long-term cognitive, emotional, and social development. ECE is particularly beneficial for children from low-income households who face the greatest disadvantages in accessing quality education (Heckman, 2011).

### **Global Best Practices**

Countries such as Norway and New Zealand have demonstrated the transformative impact of investing in universal ECE. In Norway, pre-primary education is a legal right and focuses on play-based learning. In New Zealand, inclusive policies and parental engagement ensure equal learning opportunities for children from diverse backgrounds (OECD, 2021).

### **South African Context**

The BELA Bill's ECE mandate is timely but implementation will face structural hurdles. Many Grade R centres, especially in rural areas, lack basic infrastructure, qualified educators, and learning materials (Sello et al., 2024). Targeted investments in infrastructure and human resources will be crucial.

Moreover, teacher training must emphasise culturally responsive pedagogy and foundational learning principles. Without sufficient support for ECE practitioners, this reform risks becoming a policy in name only.

### **Formalising Homeschooling**

The formalisation of homeschooling under the BELA Bill addresses the need for quality assurance and regulatory oversight in alternative learning settings. Homeschooling has gained popularity among middle- and upper-income families, yet the absence of regulation has led to inconsistencies in educational quality and accountability.

## Global Comparisons

Germany maintains rigorous oversight of homeschooling by mandating adherence to national curricula and regular assessments. Australia has developed a system of registration, monitoring, and support services for homeschooling families (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2020). These systems strike a balance between respecting parental autonomy and ensuring educational standards.

## South African Implications

The BELA Bill mandates that homeschooled learners follow approved curricula and participate in standardised assessments. Implementation will require collaboration between DBE and homeschooling associations to create realistic, inclusive regulations. The state must also extend support services, particularly in remote areas, to ensure compliance and quality learning outcomes.

To minimise resistance from well-established homeschooling communities, transparent communication and co-design of regulatory frameworks will be necessary. Engagement and flexibility will help ensure that the formalisation process is seen not as a threat but as an opportunity for support and enrichment.

## BELA Provisions and International Lessons

Table 1 below summarises the key provisions of the BELA Bill alongside relevant international case studies and the insights they offer for South Africa. This comparative overview highlights how global experiences can inform and strengthen local implementation strategies.

**Table 1:** Summary of BELA Provisions and International Lessons

Provision	Country Example	Insight / Lesson for South Africa
Language policy regulation	Canada, India	Multilingual frameworks promote inclusion while preserving diversity.
Centralised school admissions	Finland	Geographic-based admissions improve equity and reduce school segregation.
Compulsory Grade R	Norway, New Zealand	Universal access to ECE supports social fairness and developmental outcomes.
Homeschooling regulation	Germany, Australia	Balancing oversight with parental freedom ensures quality and accountability in alternative education.

## Discussion

The successful implementation of the BELA Bill hinges on a holistic framework that prioritises stakeholder engagement, capacity building, infrastructure development, and robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. This section outlines actionable recommendations to address these critical areas, while considering the political and financial realities that could affect reform outcomes.

### Engaging Stakeholders

Stakeholder engagement is pivotal for enhancing support and ensuring the sustainability of the BELA Bill's reforms. Active collaboration between educators, parents, learners, and community leaders is necessary to create a shared vision for education transformation.

### Building Partnerships:

Stakeholder partnerships must be established at all levels, including national, provincial, and local. Engagement forums, such as school governing body (SGB) meetings and public consultations, should provide platforms for stakeholders to voice their concerns and contribute to decision-making processes. Building coalitions with SGBs, in particular, will be essential for countering resistance

from privileged communities that may perceive centralised admissions or language policy changes as a threat to their autonomy or standards.

#### **Promoting Awareness and Advocacy:**

Awareness campaigns should be launched to educate stakeholders about the objectives and benefits of the BELA Bill. For example, targeted outreach programmes can highlight the importance of early childhood education and the benefits of mother-tongue instruction in improving learning outcomes. Advocacy efforts must also address misconceptions about the regulation of homeschooling and language policies, emphasising how these reforms advance fairness and quality.

#### **Community Empowerment**

Empowering local communities to take ownership of education reforms is critical. For instance, equipping SGBs with the knowledge and tools to implement language and admissions policies can help bridge gaps between policy and practice. Community leaders can also play a vital role in advocating for equitable resource allocation and supporting the rollout of early childhood education programmes.

#### **Capacity Building**

Teacher training and professional development are central to the success of the BELA Bill's provisions. Without adequately equipped educators, even the most well-intentioned reforms risk falling short of their goals.

#### **Prioritising Multilingual Education**

The regulation of language policies under the BELA Bill necessitates significant investments in training educators to deliver multilingual instruction effectively. Teachers who are proficient in multiple languages and trained in culturally responsive pedagogy are better equipped to support diverse learners (Madiba, 2013). Training programmes should prioritise these competencies, especially in under-resourced areas where linguistic diversity is most pronounced.

#### **Enhancing Early Childhood Education Skills**

The introduction of compulsory Grade R calls for a substantial increase in the number of qualified ECE educators. Training a substantial number of additional Grade R teachers will require significant annual investment, including funding for tuition, learning materials, and ongoing in-service support. Professional development programmes should emphasise child-centred teaching methods, play-based learning, and social-emotional development. Partnerships with institutions in countries such as Finland and Norway can provide strategic guidance and training modules.

#### **Incentivising Professional Development**

To attract and retain high-quality educators, the government should introduce incentives for teachers who complete advanced training or specialise in areas critical to the BELA Bill, such as ECE and multilingual education. These incentives could include salary increases, career advancement opportunities, and scholarships for further studies.

#### **Infrastructure Development**

Addressing disparities in infrastructure is essential for creating a supportive learning environment and ensuring that all learners benefit from effective education.

#### **Targeted Resource Allocation**

The DBE must prioritise funding for under-resourced schools, particularly in rural and township areas. Investments should focus on building and upgrading facilities such as classrooms, libraries, laboratories, and playgrounds. For ECE centres, additional resources are needed to create child-friendly spaces that support early learning and development.

### **Leveraging Technology**

Technology can play a transformative role in addressing infrastructure gaps. The provision of digital learning tools, such as tablets and online resources, can help bridge disparities in access to quality education. Partnerships with private sector organisations and international donors can support the rollout of technology-enabled learning initiatives, particularly in remote areas.

### **Sustainable Development**

Infrastructure development must be guided by principles of sustainability and equity. For example, schools can adopt green building practices, such as using renewable energy sources and implementing water-saving technologies, to reduce operational costs and promote environmental responsibility. Additionally, infrastructure planning should consider the needs of learners with disabilities, ensuring that all schools are accessible and inclusive.

### **Monitoring and Evaluation**

Robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks are crucial for tracking the progress of the BELA Bill's reforms and identifying areas for improvement.

### **Developing Comprehensive Indicators**

The DBE should establish clear indicators to measure the success of each provision under the BELA Bill. For instance, metrics for early childhood education could include enrolment rates, teacher qualifications, and learner outcomes in foundational literacy and numeracy. For language policies, indicators could track the availability of mother-tongue instruction and learner performance in multilingual classrooms.

### **Leveraging Data for Decision-Making**

Data collection and analysis should be central to the M&E process. Regular assessments, such as school audits and learner surveys, can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of reforms. This data can inform evidence-based decision-making and enable the government to adapt its strategies in response to emerging challenges.

### **Encouraging Accountability**

M&E frameworks should include mechanisms to hold stakeholders accountable for their roles in implementing the BELA reforms. For example, school governing bodies and district education offices can be required to submit regular progress reports, ensuring that responsibilities are clearly defined and outcomes are monitored.

### **Promoting Transparency**

Transparency is essential for building trust and maintaining stakeholder support. The DBE should publish annual progress reports on the implementation of the BELA Bill, highlighting achievements, challenges, and future priorities. Engaging independent evaluators to conduct periodic reviews can further enhance credibility and provide an objective assessment of the reforms' impact.

## **Conclusion**

The BELA Bill represents a transformative and ambitious initiative in South Africa's ongoing efforts to address entrenched inequalities and ensure access to quality education for all learners. By focusing on key areas such as regulating language and admissions policies, making early childhood education compulsory, and formalising homeschooling, the bill seeks to dismantle systemic barriers and improve academic outcomes. These reforms are particularly critical in a nation where socio-economic and linguistic diversity pose both challenges and opportunities.

The BELA Bill aligns with international best practices, drawing lessons from successful education systems globally. Examples such as Canada's bilingual education policies, Norway's universal early childhood education, and Germany's robust homeschooling regulations highlight how similar reforms have advanced inclusivity and improved educational outcomes. However, implementing

these policies in the South African context requires a nuanced approach that takes into account the country's unique socio-political and economic landscape.

The potential of the BELA Bill to transform South Africa's education system lies in its ability to inspire collective action and innovation. Achieving its ambitious goals will require significant investments in infrastructure, teacher training, and capacity building. Additionally, sustained stakeholder engagement, including educators, parents, and communities, will be critical to encouraging buy-in and addressing resistance. Robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks must be established to track progress, ensure accountability, and adapt strategies in response to emerging challenges.

Ultimately, the success of the BELA Bill will hinge on a shared commitment to its vision of equitable and inclusive education. By addressing systemic disparities and empowering learners, the bill has the potential to lay the foundation for a more just and prosperous South Africa, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to the nation's future.

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