

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i7.2987>

Conceptual Analysis of the Basic Education Laws Amendment Act and Its Implications for Diversity and Inclusion

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Abstract

The ideas of diversity and inclusion have become prevalent throughout literature, with their expression included in various legislations. This paper presents a conceptual analysis of the Basic Education Laws Amendment Act focusing on its implications on diversity and inclusion in a changing South African legislative landscape. The critical theory underpinned the study to evaluate the Acts' potential impacts on enhancing equal access to quality basic education. Research synthesis methods employed the qualitative research approach to identify broad themes and related subthemes across these studies in relation to the BELA Act. The review used systematic methods to identify research studies that examined how the BELA Act influences issues of diversity and inclusion. The Thematic analysis identified three themes: (1) The role of the BELA Act in addressing equity and access to quality education (2) Impact of the BELA Act on parental involvement and community engagement in basic education (3) The implications of the BELA Act for diversity and inclusion in basic education. This literature review highlights the ongoing tensions between the Department of Basic Education and South African schools in implementing policies that promote diversity and inclusion in education. The findings suggest that while the BELA Act introduces progressive measures to promote inclusivity, challenges remain in policy implementation, stakeholder resistance, and schools' systemic inequalities. The study concludes with recommendations for enhancing the practical application of the Act to foster a more inclusive and equitable basic education system in South Africa.

Keywords: Basic Education Laws Amendment Bill, diversity, inclusion, equity, education policy, South Africa.

Introduction

Background

Against the backdrop of Engelbrecht (2020); Kanyopa (2023) who mentioned that diversity and inclusion in South African basic education is littered with broken promises. Drawing from South African education background, diversity and inclusion has over twenty-four years evolved into an escalating pedagogical educational formation (Murungi, 2015; Reygan & Steyn, 2017). It is arguable that diversity and inclusion are terms that explain the idea of universal human rights (Armstrong et al., 2019). Meanwhile, Walton and Engelbrecht (2024) validate the holistic evolution of South African schools since 1994 and revealed that diversity and inclusion in schools is the strength and success of right to education for all.

In the light of the earlier legislations and Acts on the observation of diversity and inclusion in South African education context has far reaching implications and as such these necessities for the SASA amendment, thus, as the case with this conceptual study. The Basic Education Laws Amendment Act (BELA, here after) concerns the increasing range of student diversity and inclusion arrangements that significantly impact the teaching and learning process in South

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African schools (Oosthuizen & van der Walt, 2024).

Body of literature reveals issues such as poor of proper professional development, untrained educators and lack of resources as the main sources for the challenges on realizing and embracing diversity and inclusion in South African schools (Engelbrecht, 2020; Reygan & Steyn, 2017). Consequently, research by Fish Hodgson (2018); Hardy and Woodcock (2015) provide an interpretative evolution of legislations that intended to support diversity, inclusion and integration of students in schools. Indeed, findings from these studies reveal that the fundamental challenges regarding realizing diversity and inclusion is the inconsistency on implementation of policies and legislations (Armstrong et al., 2019; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015).

Research also shows that the distinction between policies implementation processes and educational stakeholders is broader in South African education context (Makwambeni et al., 2023), this implies that, roles and expectation of each stakeholder is not clear in most of policies implementation. Consequently, that prompted this conceptual analysis that intends to inform the process of addressing existing challenges in responding to the diversity and inclusion in South African basic education context. Thus, this paper presents a conceptual analysis of the BELA focusing on its implications on diversity and inclusion in a changing South African legislative landscape.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that underpins this study is the critical theory. The theory originated from the Frankfurt School with originators such as Mark Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse (Wheatland, 2009). Critical theory interrogates power, inequality, social structures and in this way expose hidden and systemic injustice embedded in legislation (Apple, 2019). For this study, the critical theory is well-suited for unpacking how the BELA Act may reinforce or challenge systems of privilege, marginalisation, and exclusion in South Africa. Sayed and Ahmed (2018) show how the critical theory can show structural inequality being expressed in education policy and practice. This is excellent for situating the BELA Act within a localised critical discourse. The critical theory encourages questioning whose interests the BELA Act serves and how it may (re)produce societal inequalities. Hence, the issue of inclusion is in the spotlight.

Literature Review

In various international contexts, the ideas on inclusion have transformed the school systems and educational policies. Inclusion in education involves ways through which the schools are organised and is directed by the educational system which sets goals for inclusion (Van Miegheem et al., 2020). In this literature review, we will cover the inclusion as an educational philosophy that is necessary due to diversity and give a review of the BELA on how it relates to inclusion.

Inclusive education as an educational philosophy

The goal of education is largely decided upon by politicians to a large extent (Nilholm, 2014) and this often comes in form of laws, acts and policies. These goals established by the politicians need to be investigated by researchers to see if they meet the inclusion that is required in the education system. The understanding among the researchers is that inclusion is an educational philosophy that has benefits such as: reducing the occurrence of inappropriate behaviour; improving individual learner achievement, preparation for future engagements and increased gaining of skills and friendships (Mahapatra, 2007). The biggest barrier to such inclusion is how

the society may harbour negative attitudes it. Other barriers would include physical barriers such as infrastructure; the curriculum not meeting the needs of the learners and poorly or untrained staff.

Learners has individual needs (de Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2010) and inclusion requires not only physical but social integration too (Van Mieghem et al., 2020). To measure the effectiveness of inclusive education, academic and socio-emotional outcomes must be looked at (Koster et al., 2009). Considering this, inclusion becomes a multi-faceted and complex concept with its philosophical application and development varying from place to place. What is clear is that inclusive education involves advocating for equal education opportunities for all learners, particularly including the provision of support to learners with learning barrier (Murungi, 2015). It is common conclusion that classrooms are becoming more and more diverse hence the topic on inclusion cannot be avoided.

Attitudes towards inclusion in education are defined as the perceptions, views, beliefs, feelings (Alkhateeb, Hadidi & Alkhateeb, 2016) towards inclusion. If the attitudes towards inclusion are positive then the school will have a climate that will celebrate diversity (Loreman, 2014). Attitudes of the various stakeholders in the school become critical in the development of an environment that promotes inclusion in a way that embraces diversity. The analysis by (Van Mieghem et al., 2020) indicates that attitudes of teachers toward inclusion among teachers vary and among the parents differ in terms of their children's abilities.

Legislatively, the Salamanca Agreement which depicts diversity as an assert promotes normalising of inclusion (UNESCO 1994, 2020). This has inspired countries that have signed this agreement to create legislation that is in keeping with inclusivity. South Africa as one of the 92 countries signatory to the agreement 92 member states, committed to inclusive education delivery through changing laws and policies (Ainscow, 2020). Clearly, inclusive education is globally accepted as an important educational philosophy. Besides, the sustainable development goal 4 identifies the need to plan for making quality inclusive education accessible to all (Maree, Condy & Meda, 2023).

The BELA and Inclusion

To enhance quality education in South Africa, the South African Schools Act (1996) (SASA) has been replaced by the Basic Education Law Amendment Act 84, 2024 (BELA)h Africa's education quality. SASA was established to democratise the education system during the dawn of democracy with a mandate for the formation of school governing bodies (SGBs). To embrace diversity, inclusion must be focused on. According to SASA 84 of 1996 section 6(1), a public school's governing body may be responsible for putting together the school's policies subject to the constitution and any applicable provincial law. The inclusion in this way starts with the SGB's composition which must reflect the diversity in the community. The democratisation of school governance does in itself influence the inclusive education but to what extent does the BELA regulate inclusion?

The BELA like the SASA indicates that the SGB develops the school policies and highlights that these policies must be submitted to the Head of Department for ratification. While this is in line with cooperative governance, it has been indicated that the powers of the SGB's have been shaved off. An example of how inclusivity is considered in the BELA is encouraged to make the language policy to be broader and inclusive. This also speaks to the SGB's representation of the community's diversity and the broader community's needs. How this links with the child's best

interests can be an area of further study.

Methodology

Research approach

The research approach for this conceptual study is qualitative. In which words, terminologies and diverse concepts are used as evidence (Flick, 2019). Further, this study analysed existing literature in the public domain on the implementation of BELA by focusing specifically on its implications on the issue of learner diversity and inclusion in South African schools.

Research Design and Data Collection

Desktop research design was employed to systematically review the literature and identify research studies that examine how the BELA Act influences issues of diversity and inclusion in South African schools. Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was selected as an appropriate data collection method for this literature-based study because it allows researchers to identify, select and critically appraises studies in order to answer the research questions (Pati & Lorusso, 2018; Pollock & Berge, 2018).

Data Collection Process

Through SLR this study managed to collect and analysed data concurrently and iteratively. Through five steps outlined below, researchers of the study systematically moved back and forth as they reviewed literature in this study.

Step one: Formulating Research Questions

To start, researchers formulate research questions that they are wished to answer through the existing literature. Further, researchers made sure that research questions are clear and focused on the implications of BELA on the issues of diversity and inclusion in South African schools. Research questions that guided this SLR are as follows.

Research Questions

1. What role does the BELA Act play in promoting equity and access to quality education in South Africa?
2. In what ways does the BELA Act influence parental involvement and community engagement in basic education?
3. What are the implications of the BELA Act for enhancing diversity and inclusion within the basic education system?

Step two: Search and Identify Data Sources

Researchers identified and selected data sources through Google Scholar electronic search. The search specifically sought qualitative studies published between 2021 and 2025 on BELA and its implementation in South African education system. Initially, we used five keywords “Basic Education Laws Amendment Act” to search for the sources and the result yielded about 36,900 publications. Then, in the second search we used the same five keywords with time limitation 2021-2025 and the results were reduced to 1,230 publications.

Step three: Systematic reading and re-reading of data sources

Under this step, researchers conducted intensive literature review by reading and re-reading of

the various sources on the researched issue. Researchers used google scholar searching gear to select data sources. Conversely, researchers explore the background, context, and methodology employed on the sources. Consequently, by reading and re-reading the sources, researchers managed to pick cross-cutting themes like equity, quality education, parental and community involvement as well as diversity in education. Through this step, researchers managed to identify similarities and differences from the sources which helped the researchers to examine and identify common patters, phrases and words that representing issues of inclusion in South African education context.

Step Four: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Detailed plans towards the inclusion and exclusion criteria were clearly observed by both researchers. This helped them to avoid duplication of the studies reviewed. Hence, abstracts of the selected studies were read carefully to identify the relevance to the aim of the current study. Kanyopa et al. (2024); Nuis et al. (2023) revealed that inclusion and exclusion steps are crucial as they help researchers to include relevant literature and exclude irrelevant ones. Thus, the table below summarizes the studies that were reviewed in this desktop study.

| Titles | Authors | Key concepts |
|--|--|---|
| Basic Education Policy in South Africa: From 1994 to now: Policy Paper 33 | Gustafsson, M., & Nonkenge, K. (2025) | Basic education policy, early grade learning, Schools, South Africa |
| COVID-19 and the violation of the right to basic education of learners with disabilities in South Africa: An examination of Centre for Child Law v Minister of Basic Education | Kamga, S. D. (2021) | The right to basic education of learners with disabilities in South Africa, equity, BELA |
| The BELA Amendment and Discipline in Schools: Rhetoric or Real Change in Combating Corporal Punishment | Koalane, L. T., & Letuma, M. C. (2025) | Classroom management, corporal punishment, discipline, secondary schools, self-efficacy, BELA |
| Basic educational reform and provision of quality education in South Africa (1994-2018): A tentative exploration of policy in the making | Lawrence, A. R. (2022) | Quality education, policy, administration in basic education |
| Recent Legal Developments: | Machaka, B. J. (2025) | Basic education, equal access |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Reconceptualizing Undocumented Children's Access to Basic Education in South Africa | | to schools, public schools, South Africa |
| Litigating the right to basic education for undocumented children in South Africa: The role of the courts in advancing access to schools. | Maistry, A., & van Schalkwyk, C. (2024) | Basic education, undocumented, South African schools |
| Basic principle and legal perspectives on the Basic Education Laws Amendment Bill-BELA (2021). | Oosthuizen, I., & van der Walt, J. L. (2024) | Basic Education Laws Amendment Bill, parental and community involvement, equity |
| Law reform and case law affecting children 2023/24 | Proudlock, P., Nyathi, M., Hansungule-Nefale, Z., Peacock, T., Lake, L., Frankiv, T., & Pereira-Kotzev, K. (2023) | Basic Education Laws Amendment Bill, education equality, South Africa |
| Race, class, and the democratic project in contemporary South African education: Working and reworking the law | Soudien, C. (2023) | Inequality, race, Basic Education Laws Amendment policy, education laws, South Africa |
| The Basic Education Laws Amendment Bill: A case study in transformative constitutionalism beyond the Courts | Veriava, F. (2024) | Basic Education Laws Amendment Bill; basic education; school governing bodies; transformative constitutionalism |

Step Five: Critical Appraisal

Critical appraisal step guided researchers systematically and thoroughly to evaluate the trustworthiness, values and relevance of the selected sources. This step helped researchers to make decisions on the themes that present the findings of the study below. Also, findings of the study inform the results by using evidence reliability. Therefore, the findings of the study presented below were carefully systematically examined by judging the relevance, reliability and validity of the reviewed literature.

Discussion of Findings

This section presents findings from the systematic literature review on the Amendment of Basic Education Laws Act, whilst the focus is on its implications on diversity and inclusion within South African school context. Three major themes that emerged from the conceptual analysis of

reviewed literature guide the discussion and presentation of research findings below.

Theme One: The role of the BELA Act in addressing equity and access to quality education

Findings from the current study reveals that BELA Act aims to redress inequalities in accessing quality education in South African school contexts. Indeed, Department of Basic Education (DBE hereafter) introduces this act to strengthening oversight of South African School Act (SASA hereafter) on admission procedures and language policy in South African public schools (Zungu & Law, 2024). Conversely, Gustafsson and Nonkenge, (2025) affirm that the Act also clarifies the departmental role in ensuring that South African schools are operated in fairness policies that intentionally focus on redressing the legacy of the previous educational practices.

On one hand, body of literature reveals that the Act grants Department of Education (DOE hereafter) greater authority to review and approve process taken by schools to formulate School Governing Bodies (SGBs hereafter) (Lawrence, 2022; Oosthuizen & van der Walt, 2024). This implies that the Act intends to make sure that all process and procedures in schools are align with national standards as well as with constitutional principles in eliminating discriminatory systems in schools. Additionally, Veriava (2024) revealed that BELA Act aims to strengthen the accountability of SGBs, particularly in the process of financial management.

The BELA Act seems to enforce and empower provincial Educational Departments to comply with constitutional principles on ensuing that no learner is denied access to education based on discriminatory factors such as race, ethic group, language or historical background. This was supported by Kanga (2021); Soudien (2023) that the Act ensures inclusive practices and policies are well observed within South African education system. Moreover, Proudlock et al. (2023) affirms that BELA Act upholds the fundamental right of every learner to learn in an environment that provides equal opportunities and celebrates diversity.

More importantly, this study has found that BELA Act reinforces the principles that schools should be safe, and welcoming ground where all learners are treated with dignity and fairness, regardless of their personal differences. Findings from this theme also affirm that BELA Act seeks to address the barriers that prevent underprivileged learners from accessing quality education (Maistry & van Schalkwyk, 2024).

Theme Two: Impact of the BELA Act on parental involvement and community engagement in basic education

In essence, BELA Act introduces significant changes to how South African schools functioning, particularly in relation to parental involvement and community engagement. Findings from this study indicate that the Act responses a wide range of educational stakeholders including parents and different community organisations. Research by Lawrence (2022); Machaka (2025) alluded that the Act aspires to promote concerns on parents and community's right over learners' education. Nevertheless, Veriava (2024) mentions that exclusion of parent and learners' communities in the school functioning enhances absenteeism and gangsterism in schools. This was also supported by Gustafsson and Nonkenge (2025) that active inclusion of parents and community in schools would adjust school attendance and minimize the learner dropout rate.

In like manner, this study also found that BELA Act seeks to amend SASA and employment of Educator Act of 1998 by clarifying and redefining the importance of language policy for basic education. Significantly, parental involvement and community engagement were mentioned to

intervene violence in schools and emphasise adherence to the school code of conduct (Koalane & Letuma, 2025; Machaka, 2025). However, some literature argued that BELA Act takes away parents' right to control their children's education (Proudlock, et al., 2023). In addition to that, scholars like Maistry and van Schalkwyk (2024) mentioned that the Act enforces curriculums on parents who choose to home school their children. Moreover, Oosthuizen and van der Walt (2024) they argued that it cannot be right for parents and community to be limited and controlled in learners' education, thus, education system needs to accommodate them freely and fairly.

Notwithstanding, other scholars like Willemse (2023); Veriava (2024) explained that the Act intends to bring about a better balance between the power of SGBs and learners' parents. This implies that the Act intends to downscale the power of SGBs in the sense that they would not possess final decision and authority regarding language of teaching and learning particularly in foundation phase, without consulting with learners' parents. In a subsequent literature review, this study mentions that BELA Act intentionally influence more adoptable, inclusive and alignment for the South African basic education system.

Therefore, this study maintains that this Act is as necessary for the promotion of equal access to education for all learners in South African schools. This study possess that the act would not only solve parental involvement and community engagement challenges in schools but also would eradicate inequalities created by the previous education system in South Africa.

Theme Three: The implications of the BELA Act for diversity and inclusion in basic education

BELA Act carries significant implications for diversity and inclusion in South Africa's basic education system. Its provisions are designed to address inequalities and promote equitable access to education, but they also raise concerns about balancing standardisation with contextual responsiveness. Findings from this theme mentions the issue of centralised admission and language policies as one of the implications of the Act for diversity and inclusion in basic education. This was also supported by Gustafsson and Nonkenge (2025) that by giving the Head of Department (HoD hereafter) authority over school admission and language policy decisions, the Act aims to prevent exclusionary practices that were previously reinforced by SGBs only. This study supports that with greater diversity this will allow learners from varied racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds to access schools that may have previously used language or other criteria as a gatekeeping mechanism. It aligns with the constitutional right to non-discriminatory access to education.

Findings also reveal standardisation of language policies promotes multilingualism and seeks to prevent linguistic exclusion, whilst encourages learner integration. This was mentioned by Soudien (2023) as it may also cause challenges in diverse linguistic and cultural traditions if not implemented with sensitivity to South African school contexts. Thus, there is a need for policies that balance inclusion with the preservation of cultural identity. Moreover, this study found that the Act makes it a legal obligation for parents to ensure their children attend school regularly and regulates learner registration processes. This provision aims to reduce learner dropout and ensure inclusive participation in basic education (Kamga, 2021; Koalane & Letuma, 2025).

In essence, by introducing more stringent requirements for home education, including curriculum approval, the Act ensures that all learners, regardless of where they are educated, receive quality education aligned with national standards. Oosthuizen and van der Walt (2024) argued that this protects learners from being excluded from the formal education system,

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especially in cases where home schooling may lack structure.

This study also argues that while the Act promotes equity goals, the reduction in SGB authority over key policies may somehow limit parent-community driven in decision making. Maistry and van Schalkwyk (2024) strongly agreed that community and parental involvement are essential for contextually relevant inclusive education.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The role of the BELA Act focuses on addressing the issues on equity and access to quality education in a manner that redresses the imbalances of the past. In this way, schools are expected to become places of safety, where learners and other stakeholders feel welcome in a way that is respectful and fair. Consequently, there is an encouragement to involve parents and the community in a manner that enhances inclusivity and accommodates diversity. However, the study shows the downscaling of the powers of the SGBs and the transfer of authority to the head of department. Now that the BELA Act is in place, the wait is now of the implementation of the changed policies and further studies could be focuses on empirical research on this area. Hence, this study maintains that the Act needs to balance this issue carefully, otherwise, it could unintentionally disempower historically marginalised communities that have fought for representation and voice in school governance.

With anything that is new, there is need for training and workshops geared on educating the stakeholders on the changes that the BELA Act brings. The emphasis on the transformative agenda of the Act that engenders inclusion should be the driving force of the training sessions and workshop. Training sessions and workshops must be inclusive to portray the intents and the vision of the BELA Acts.

This study also recommends the practical application of the BELA Act through the showcasing of best practices and examples of schools that have successfully implemented the amended policies. Policy implementation has always been a challenge and failure to implement it in the light of BELA Act which promotes transformation for inclusivity may prevent the intended transformation.

Acknowledgement

The authors extend their sincere gratitude to the scholars whose work was synthesised in this study. Their valuable contributions, openness, and scholarly generosity greatly informed and enriched this conceptual review and are deeply appreciated.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Authors declared no conflict of interests

Funding

Authors received no financial support for this research.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in the study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data collected for this study are not publicly available due to privacy and confidentiality restrictions.

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