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Language and Admissions

Who Decides Who Belongs?

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Opening Reflection

Language is more than a tool, it's identity, memory, and belonging. In South Africa's diverse educational landscape, the language of instruction and the criteria for school admission have long shaped who feels welcome and who is left out. The BELA Bill proposes shifting decision-making power from school governing bodies to provincial departments. This raises a vital question: Who decides who belongs, and on what grounds?

What the BELA Bill Says

- School Governing Bodies (SGBs) must submit their language and admission policies to the Head of Department (HoD) for approval.
- The HoD may direct a school to adopt more than one language of instruction, where practicable.
- The HoD must ensure that schools receive the necessary resources to implement additional languages.
- The Department of Basic Education gains final authority over admissions and language decisions.

What's Changed: From SASA to BELA

Under SASA (1996):

SGBs had primary authority over language and admission policies, allowing schools to reflect local community needs and cultural identities.

Under BELA (2024):

The HoD now has the power to approve, amend or override these policies. The Department may enforce multilingual instruction and admissions criteria to promote equity.

Key Shift:

From community-led governance to departmental oversight, aimed at standardising access but potentially limiting local autonomy.

Why It Matters

This clause seeks to address historic exclusion, particularly where language has been used to deny access to learners from marginalised communities. However, it also risks eroding the cultural and linguistic identity of schools, especially those serving minority language groups.

From a systems-thinking perspective, this is a tension between equity and identity. While central oversight may promote fairness, it must not flatten diversity. Language is a living inheritance, and admissions are more than logistics, they are acts of welcome.

Philosophically, this touches on multilingual pedagogy, cultural rights, and participatory governance. Ubuntu reminds us that inclusion must honour difference, not erase it.

Reflective Responses

How do we balance equity with cultural and linguistic identity?

By ensuring that departmental oversight includes meaningful consultation with communities, and by resourcing schools to offer multilingual instruction without compromising quality.

What risks emerge when admissions are centralised?

Loss of contextual sensitivity, bureaucratic delays, and potential misalignment with local values or needs.

How can schools remain inclusive without losing their distinctiveness?

Through transparent policy-making, community dialogue, and a commitment to both access and authenticity.

Sidebar: Facts and Philosophy

Statistics from the DBE (2022):

- Over 80% of South African learners receive instruction in a language other than their home language.
- Afrikaans-speaking schools report a 35% decline in enrolment over the past decade, citing policy uncertainty.
- Black learners are disproportionately affected by language-based admission barriers in former Model C schools.

“Language is not just a medium of instruction, it is a medium of empowerment. To deny a child their language is to deny them their voice.” - Prof. Neville Alexander, *Language Policy Scholar*.