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Local solutions to structural inequalities: compensatory school practices in urban and rural school environments

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how two Swedish lower secondary schools, one in a disadvantaged urban area and the other in a rural municipality, enact the compensatory mission of promoting educational equity. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews, the study applies Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional theory of justice to analyse compensatory practices as redistribution, recognition, and representation. The findings show that both schools pursue redistribution through the organisation of teaching, staffing, and learning environments that support conditions for learning. Recognition is enacted by shifting attention from student deficits to teaching quality, relationships, and trust. Representation is expressed mainly through professional agency and staff participation in decision-making. Although these practices take different forms across contexts, they share a commitment to enhancing students' opportunities for knowledge development and participation. The study identifies a structural paradox: while schools can mitigate educational inequalities, their capacity to do so remains constrained by the broader social conditions that produce them.

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Introduction

Swedish schools are mandated to provide equal educational opportunities to all students. Codified in the Education Act (Rönnlund et al., 2025) and the national curriculum (Skolverket, 2022), this *compensatory mission* [*Swedish: kompensatoriska uppdraget*], places an expectation on schools to counteract social and economic inequalities to enable all students to reach their potential irrespective of where they live (Malmberg et al., 2014).

Despite this policy framework for equity, educational outcomes in Sweden have become increasingly unequal (Böhlmark et al., 2016; Bunar & Sernhede, 2013; Holm & Dovemark, 2020; Lund, 2020). Intensifying school segregation has concentrated socio-economic disadvantages in certain urban schools, frequently framed in public and policy discourse as "problem schools" (Bunar & Ambrose, 2016; Voyer, 2019). In reality however, educational inequality is not an exclusively urban phenomenon. Instead, substantial disparities also exist between schools in urban and rural areas (Holmlund et al., 2020; Skolverket, 2025).

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Schools in rural areas and in small towns face distinct challenges such as long commuting distances, small student populations, and teacher shortages, all of which affect students' opportunities to achieve educational goals (Skolverket, 2025). These areas often have lower education levels and weaker academic traditions (Holmlund et al., 2020), and are frequently depicted as a moral periphery – backward, traditional, and in need of improvement – producing symbolic marginalization that shapes local identities and educational aspirations (Areschoug, 2022). This creates a different context for enacting the compensatory mission than in urban areas, with their distinct challenges.

Although studies have pointed out differences between rural and urban contexts (Öhrn & Beach, 2019), both scholarly and political accounts of educational inequality tend to focus on urban areas (Hargreaves et al., 2009). This limits our understanding of how the unique challenges of rural schools can be addressed, but also, more generally, of how schools seek to counteract social inequalities in varied local contexts. More specifically, there is a lack of comparative studies on how the compensatory mission is interpreted and enacted across different spatial contexts.

The present study examines how the "compensatory mission" is understood and implemented in two schools, one in a socio-economically disadvantaged urban area and one in a rural area. Both schools have shown steady improvement in student outcomes over the past five years and are therefore selected to shed light on how compensatory practices are enacted in the contexts where they are most needed. In this regard, the two schools can be understood as critical cases. By analysing how these schools translate national goals into local practices, the study shows how compensatory work is shaped by very different local contexts. Using Nancy Fraser's (2003, 2008) three-dimensional theory of justice – *redistribution*, *recognition*, and *representation* – the study aims to analyse how compensatory work extends beyond resource allocation to encompass the cultural and political dimensions of justice.

The compensatory mission

The Education Act (Rönnlund et al., 2025) emphasizes that all children must receive the support and stimulation they need to maximize their development and that disparities in educational opportunity should be actively addressed. The school's role in compensating for social inequalities is central to the Swedish school system's democratic and justice-oriented ethos. Despite this ideal, interpretations and implementations of the compensatory mandate vary significantly between schools (Beach et al., 2018). The large and increasing differentiation between schools has its roots in educational reforms in the 1990s, which combined decentralization with increased market orientation in the educational sector.

Schools in Sweden are primarily funded through municipal income taxes, with municipalities allocating resources based on students' needs, often using socio-economic weighting to direct more funding to disadvantaged schools (Skolverket, 2022). To promote equity, a national municipal equalisation system redistributes resources from municipalities with stronger tax bases to those with weaker ones or higher structural costs, such as rural areas (Statistics Sweden, n.d.). Despite this, significant variation remains, with per-pupil expenditure differing by approximately 20–40% between municipalities. Within urban areas, schools in socio-economically disadvantaged contexts typically receive higher funding per student than those in more affluent areas (Skolverket, 2022). In addition to municipal funding, schools can access targeted government grants aimed at supporting equity, such as funding for increased teacher density or support for newly arrived students. Together, these mechanisms are intended to support the compensatory mission, although disparities in practice persist.

Compensatory practices in urban and rural contexts

Research has consistently identified a tension between the ambitions of compensatory education and the structural conditions that reproduce inequality. In both policy and practice, compensatory

approaches have often been criticised for framing students from working-class or minority backgrounds as lacking cultural or academic capital, rather than recognising the resources they bring (Shain, 2016). This indicates that efforts to compensate for inequality may, at times, reproduce deficit-oriented understandings of students.

A substantial body of research shows that schools' compensatory work involves balancing resources, relationships, and forms of recognition across different contexts. In urban settings, this work is shaped by segregation, school choice, and competitive dynamics, which tend to concentrate disadvantage and reinforce symbolic hierarchies between schools (Beach & Sernhede, 2011; Holm & Dovemark, 2020; Lund, 2020, 2021). In rural areas, studies point instead to structural vulnerabilities such as teacher shortages, small student populations, and geographic marginalisation (Beach et al., 2018; Skolverket, 2025). Across both contexts, compensatory efforts are often constrained by economic and organisational conditions that limit schools' capacity to address inequality.

At the same time, research highlights the importance of relational and contextual factors. Schools in disadvantaged urban areas can provide stability, community, and social support beyond their instructional role (Beach & Sernhede, 2011), while trust and collaboration among students, teachers, and families have been identified as key resources for compensatory work (Behtoui & Strömberg, 2020). In rural contexts, strong local ties and social cohesion may support such relational work (Johansson, 2017), although these schools may also experience forms of marginalisation, for example when curricula and reforms are oriented towards urban norms (Beach & Öhrn, 2025). In addition, rural schools are increasingly tasked with addressing new forms of diversity and integration under conditions of limited resources (Rönnlund et al., 2025).

While this body of research provides important insights into the conditions shaping compensatory work, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature tends to examine urban and rural schools separately, with limited comparative analysis of how compensatory practices are interpreted and enacted across these contexts. Second, although the importance of resources, relationships, and local conditions is well established, less is known about how these dimensions are combined in everyday school practices. Finally, there is limited research that analyses compensatory work through a multidimensional framework that simultaneously addresses material, cultural, and participatory aspects of justice.

Taken together, existing research shows that compensatory capacity depends on the interplay between resources, institutional conditions, and social relations. However, it remains unclear how schools in different spatial contexts interpret and translate the compensatory mission into practice, and how these efforts relate to broader questions of educational justice. This study addresses these gaps by examining how two schools – one urban and one rural – enact compensatory practices within their specific local conditions.

Three dimensions of just education

To understand how the compensatory mission is enacted by teachers in the two schools, we use Nancy Fraser's (2003, 2008) theory of justice. According to Fraser, justice contains three dimensions – *redistribution*, *recognition*, and *representation* – based on the principle of parity of participation: all individuals must have genuine opportunities to participate as equals in economic, cultural, and political life (Fraser, 2003; Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

While Fraser's theory primarily addresses structural injustices at the societal level, it has increasingly been used in educational research to examine how such injustices are mediated within institutional settings (e.g., Keddie, 2012; Power, 2012). In this study, Fraser's framework is used as an analytical lens to explore how schools interpret and respond to structural inequalities in their everyday practices. Schools are thus understood as sites where broader redistributive, cultural, and political conditions are translated into organisational and pedagogical arrangements. The analysis focuses on how the dimensions of redistribution, recognition, and representation are enacted in

practice. At the same time, these practices are understood as embedded within wider economic, cultural, and political conditions – including funding systems, labour markets, and socio-spatial inequalities – which shape and constrain what schools can achieve. The study therefore examines how schools attempt to realise their compensatory mission, rather than assuming that school-level practices can resolve structural injustice.

The first dimension, *redistribution,* concerns material and structural conditions that shape participation. Fraser (2003) critiqued liberal notions of formal equality, arguing that real justice requires redistributive interventions addressing socio-economic inequality. In education, this corresponds to allocating resources, support, and teaching quality according to students' needs.

The second dimension is *recognition*, and concerns how people are socially valued (or devalued) in patterns of cultural meaning and status. Fraser distinguished between an *identity model*, which risks reinforcing group divisions, and a *status model* focused on removing institutional barriers to equal participation. In this study, we understand recognition in line with Fraser's status model, as institutionalised patterns that either enable or hinder equal participation, rather than as individual affirmation or identity validation. The analysis thus focuses on how school practices, such as pedagogical norms, expectations, and organisational routines, may counteract or reproduce status hierarchies that position certain students as less capable or legitimate participants. Everyday practices (e.g., how teaching responsibility is framed or how student needs are interpreted) are thus analysed as potential sites where broader patterns of (mis)recognition are enacted in institutional form.

The third dimension, *representation*, focuses on who participates in decision-making and sets the agenda. It involves political inclusion, identifying who is heard, misrepresented, or excluded in the decision-making process (Fraser, 2008). In educational settings, this ideally involves students, guardians, and professionals. However, as the empirical focus of this study is primarily on school staff and organisational practices, representation is mainly analysed at the level of professional participation, leadership, and organisational decision-making. The analysis should therefore be understood as examining institutional conditions for representation rather than fully assessing participatory parity for all groups.

Following Keddie (2012) and Cazden (2012), we consequently understand schools' compensatory work as a multidimensional justice project involving redistribution, recognition, and representation. In educational practice, these dimensions become visible in different but interrelated ways: through the allocation of resources such as teaching time, staffing, and support (redistribution), through how students are valued and positioned in pedagogical practices (recognition), and through who is included in decision-making processes and everyday school interactions (representation). As Power (2012) noted, educational policy has often addressed these dimensions in isolation, addressing symptoms rather than underlying structural inequalities. Thus, the compensatory function is conceptualised as a multidimensional and context-dependent justice project. Importantly, these dimensions are shaped by local conditions and are therefore expressed differently across contexts. This highlights the need for contextual and comparative perspectives, where justice is understood as situated rather than uniformly enacted. At the same time, in line with Fraser (2003, 2008), the dimensions are analytically distinct but empirically intertwined. For example, decisions about organising teaching may simultaneously involve the redistribution of resources, the recognition of students' needs, and the representation of staff in shaping practice. Thus, compensatory work is understood as context-dependent and relational, rather than as the application of separate principles. However, while such practices may improve the conditions for participation, they remain embedded within structural constraints and can therefore only partially address the inequalities they are intended to compensate for.

Method

The study is based on fieldwork conducted during the 2023–2024 school year at two schools in Grades 7–9: Virsta School in a disadvantaged urban area and Brantby School in a rural

municipality. Drawing on insights from educational ethnography, we have followed an interpretive and context-sensitive approach to reconstruct meaning-making in educational practices. Schools are social arenas where broader social practices and structures are enacted through everyday interactions (Gordon et al., 2001). Following Lund and Sundberg (2004), we therefore start from the concrete and context-bound to capture how pedagogical practices are constituted in specific local settings.

The two schools are treated as critical cases in the sense that they represent relatively successful schools operating under structurally challenging conditions. They were selected to explore how different educational institutions approach their "compensatory mission" in contrasting contexts: one in a rural municipality and another in a socio-economically disadvantaged metropolitan area. Both schools were identified through national and municipal data and selected based on (1) sustained improvement in grade points over a five-year period, (2) socio-demographic profiles indicating significant disadvantage, and (3) contrasting spatial contexts (urban and rural). Several schools with similar profiles were initially considered, but these cases were selected due to the consistency of improvement and accessibility for fieldwork. As such, the cases are not intended to be representative, but analytically informative for examining how compensatory practices are enacted under different conditions.

The empirical material comes from approximately four weeks of fieldwork at each school, including full-day observations of classroom teaching, participation in meetings, and informal interactions with staff and students, as well as formal interviews with teachers and school leaders (11 at Brantby and 14 at Virsta). A potential shortcoming for the analysis is that the material does not contain any formal interviews with students. Students' perspectives were instead accessed through observations of everyday interactions, and informal conversations. Including student and parent interviews would have provided additional insight into how compensatory practices are experienced, particularly regarding representation. Their absence should therefore be understood as a limitation, and the analysis of representation is conducted primarily at the levels of staff participation and organisational decision-making. The findings thus address how schools create institutional conditions for participation, rather than fully capturing participatory parity for all groups.

The material was transcribed and analysed thematically through an iterative process combining inductive and deductive strategies. Initially, the material was coded inductively to identify recurring patterns in how compensatory work was described and enacted. These themes were then reorganised in relation to Fraser's three-dimensional framework of redistribution, recognition, and representation in a more deductive process. As the dimensions overlap in practice, themes were allowed to intersect rather than being strictly categorised, capturing the interrelated material, cultural, and organisational aspects of compensatory work.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Swedish Ethics Review Authority (Dnr 2023-02713-01) and complies with GDPR and the Swedish Research Council's ethical principles. To ensure anonymity, schools were given fictitious names and specific professional roles were omitted from the results.

Description of the two schools

Virsta School is located in a disadvantaged area of a large Swedish city. In 2022, about 85 percent of students had a foreign background, significantly higher than the national average of about 25 per cent. Less than 25 per cent had a parent with post-secondary education, compared to the national average of 60 per cent. Given the strong influence of background on students' performance, it is not surprising that the grade point averages at Virsta School are below the national average. In 2017, the grade point average at Virsta School was almost 50 points below the national average, but by 2023, this gap had narrowed to 20 points. Meanwhile, student absenteeism had decreased by 70 per cent,

and sick leave among staff had likewise declined. Owing to the improved results, the school – which previously struggled with attracting students – has seen an upsurge in enrolments. Still, Virsta School is a small school, with only 200 grade 7-9 students at the time of the fieldwork.

Brantby School is in turn situated in a small rural municipality with a population of 9,000 people, whereof 3,000 in Brantby town. Historically a mill community, the municipality has faced economic decline due to industrial closures, with municipal services in healthcare and education now being the main employers. The overall education level is low, with about 20 per cent of residents holding post-secondary qualifications. The school faces challenges due to an abundance of inexpensive, vacant housing, which has led other municipalities to rent these vacancies for social housing. Brantby town therefore has a high concentration of families with low socio-economic status, leaving the school with a large share of students in need of special support. Brantby School serves around 300 students, of whom about 30 per cent have foreign-born parents. Approximately 40 per cent of the total roll have at least one parent with post-secondary education. From 2016–2017–2023–2024, the grade point averages increased by 25 points, approaching the national average.

Empirical findings: redistribution, recognition, and representation in pedagogical practice

The findings reveal how staff in the two schools sought to enact their compensatory function through strategies tailored to their urban and rural contexts. Organized around Fraser's dimensions of redistribution, recognition, and representation, we present how the two schools supported students from low-education homes while facing different structural challenges.

Compensatory practices as redistribution

Virsta School and Brantby School both employed redistribution as a central compensatory strategy, but their approaches were shaped by distinct local conditions. While both schools serve many students from homes with low educational attainment, they face different challenges. In the metropolitan context of Virsta School, segregation, social instability, and high student turnover threatened teaching time and continuity. Brantby School, located in a sparsely populated area, experienced fewer external disruptions but struggled with limited resources and recruitment difficulties.

In both contexts, redistribution centred on securing stable instructional conditions through parallel placements, level grouping, and organisational routines that ensure "study peace." Still, these common goals were realized in different ways.

Virsta School – redistribution through professionalization

At Virsta School, teachers had observed that many students enter Grade 7 with weak reading and writing skills, often due to inconsistent study habits and frequent school transfers. To compensate for this, the school leadership had made high quality teaching a priority. The school strategically recruited experienced and qualified teachers – many of whom had backgrounds in special education. At the time of the study, the school was approaching 100 percent qualified teachers, including in practical and aesthetic subjects. In parallel, the school leadership also raised requirements on pedagogical competencies among supporting staff, such as study counsellors and teaching assistants, to increase the staff's capacity to help and support students. In this way, the school sought to redistribute pedagogical and supportive capacity to its students.

Subject teams and schedule parallelization

To strengthen the effort of providing high-quality education, the collaboration structure of Virsta School was also changed from the class-and-grade-centered "work-teams" [*arbetslag*] common to many schools, to subject-centered "subject-teams" [*ämneslag*]. The teachers we spoke to described

this as a key factor for improving both results and teacher well-being. With the subject-centered collaboration structure, the common denominator changed from the student group in general to subject-specific didactic challenges and development. This, the teachers felt, made discussions more creative and focused on sharing knowledge that could be immediately implemented in teaching, rather than bogged down by general issues relating to the daily operation of the school.

> Virsta staff: [In the work teams], we often discussed operations rather than teaching. […] Now we talk about teaching in relation to the students. Because that's what we do. We talk about mathematics – "how do we explain to this and this student?" It's very beneficial, because then we have both a focus on our students, what they need, and on the content.

Joint planning in the subject-teams also enabled teachers to collaboratively design lessons and assess student needs. By sharing individual experiences and didactic strategies within the subject team, teachers transformed their insights into collective assets, enhancing all team members' ability to meet diverse student needs. With parallel classes, teachers could also group students flexibly, moving them between classrooms and allocating support staff as needed. In this way, the joint planning and parallel teaching became a redistribution of resources. The school's organization of holiday school, staffed with the most experienced teachers, similarly exhibited a redistribution logic. This approach directed the expertise of qualified educators to the students with the greatest need. Thus, the redistribution at Virsta school was both pedagogical and organizational in nature.

Brantby School – redistribution through alternative educational environments

As in Virsta, teachers at Brantby School had formed subject-teams for mathematics, non-mathematical subjects, social studies, languages, and practical-aesthetic subjects, enabling collaboration that enhanced teaching, as educators learned from one another.

Brantby School also scheduled classes in each subject in parallel to enable flexible student grouping. In mathematics and English, teachers used explicit level-based grouping. Students aiming for a higher grade thus sat in one classroom and went through the content at an accelerated pace together with one of the teachers. Meanwhile, in another classroom, struggling students worked with the same concepts supported by the other two teachers. Students with greater needs thus benefited from additional instructional time and support, while their peers benefited from a quicker pace better able to maintain their interest. This, the teachers felt, had improved outcomes and created calmer classrooms.

Normal mode and back-up

Despite a large share of long-tenured teachers, Brantby School had previously suffered from frequent leadership changes and an unclear sense of direction. Upon taking office, the current principal of Brantby School instituted a strategy to create a peaceful learning environment and enhance teaching conditions through a unified approach for conflict resolution.

To signal the shifted expectations, the new approach was dubbed "normal mode". Inspired by Fredriksson (2015), each classroom displays a poster with simple guidelines: "Here, all students who want to learn should be given the opportunity to do so". When disruptions occurred, students were temporarily relocated to an alternative setting, allowing both the individual student and the class to continue their work under more supportive conditions.

> Brantby staff: The basic idea is that you can't have a classroom with 25 students where the 25th student is constantly disrupting the others so they can't study. And in that case, the normal mode is that the student shouldn't be there until they're ready for the task – they should be somewhere else in the meantime.

This "somewhere else" was called the "back-up" – a specially staffed study room, and the school's physical solution to the *normal mode*.

> Brantby staff: And then we also have what's called the "normal mode" because those who want to learn have a right to that as well. Since we've created what we call the Back-up Room, students who disrupt the lessons go there, and we continue working so that the others really get their study peace. And having a calm learning environment is given quite a high priority.

While this separation of "orderly" and "disorderly" students could be interpreted as a disciplinary penalty, several students we spoke with informally during observations described the arrangement as an opportunity to work in a calmer environment rather than as a punishment. During observations, some students requested to work in back-up rather than remain in the regular classroom. Staff also described how certain students preferred the smaller setting and more individualised support available there. Unlike traditional disciplinary measures, back-up focused on small group instruction and tailored support. Students in back-up worked with the same tasks as in the regular classrooms, and they could rejoin that classroom the next lesson or as soon as they felt ready and the transition could be made without disrupting any ongoing lesson.

Analytically, this approach can be understood as a form of redistribution, where the learning environment was organized as a collective resource to enable participation. Time, attention, and pedagogical support were redistributed by providing alternative spaces and adult support for students who, in a given moment, required different conditions to engage in learning. In Fraser's terms, this reflects a shift from equal treatment to differentiated provision, where resources are allocated according to situational needs in order to support all students' opportunities to participate on more equal terms.

Compensatory practices as recognition

In relation to Fraser's thinking, the dimension of recognition concerns how students' experiences, identities, and social positions are acknowledged within educational practice (Fraser, 2003). This becomes crucial in schools facing socio-economic challenges: respect, belonging, and strong relationships are necessary for students to participate on equal terms. Thus, recognition forms a core part of the compensatory efforts, aiming to create learning environments in which all students are valued and visibly included.

Virsta School – from deficiency focus to professional responsibility

At Virsta School, recognition emerged primarily through the school's work to change teachers' views of students and of themselves as professional actors. At the beginning of the development work, the school's problems were often explained in terms of student deficiencies:

> Virsta staff: The way we view students is something we often come back to – how we as teachers used to see the student, and how you can hear it in the way we talk. We saw very clearly this common thing: that teachers first say, "This student, it won't work! They can't handle my teaching, they need to be taken care of in some other way. You have to take care of them!" And when issues are referred to the Student Health Team, they're expected to be solved in some magical way. You want to push the problem away.

When this approach dominates, the student is seen as the source of the problem and the school's role is reduced to merely managing the child. Consequently, the concept of "perspective change" has evolved to emphasize shifting the focus from the students' deficiencies to the quality of teaching. One teacher illustrated this transformation by comparing it to his experiences in previous positions:

> Virsta staff: Where I've worked before, […] people only talked about the students. "Adaptations, adaptations, adaptations. Take care of it, take care of it … This can't be part of my teaching. You need to take care of it … " That's what makes such a big difference here, that we've come so far in this work […]. Our own teaching is the focus.

This focus on one's own teaching illustrates a movement towards recognising students as legitimate learners entitled to appropriate pedagogical support. Rather than locating difficulties primarily within individual students, teachers described a growing focus on how instruction could be adapted

to support diverse learning needs. In this sense, recognition was enacted through a reorientation of responsibility, from managing perceived student problems to developing teaching practices that enable participation. However, this shift should not be understood as completed, or uniform. Rather, the "perspective change" was an ongoing process where teachers continuously, and with different degrees of success, sought to challenge deficiency framings.

Building institutional trust: recognition as a school culture

Teachers at Virsta School also noted that many students had low trust in the school system. Thus, teachers sought to foster a school culture in which both students and staff had confidence in the institution's capacity to promote learning. A recurring belief among the teachers was that if teaching quality was sufficiently high, students would become engaged. The higher the quality of teaching in one class, the more students would expect from their next class. Thus, the teachers argued, high-quality teaching would by itself create a positive cycle, in which students would show up increasingly attentive and ready to learn. This emphasis on the teachers' collective responsibility for building trust in their capacity as educators recognizes education as a right.

The institutional trust, combined with the parallel scheduling of classes described earlier, has made corridors quiet. It also means that school staff could sit with the door open, increasing their visibility and accessibility.

> Virsta staff: We work extremely hard on safety and trust. Extremely. That's our number one focus. I think that's the winning concept. And having adults who are present. As I said, we always keep the doors open. It's only when I'm in a meeting that mine is closed. And that goes for most people … even the principal, for example. A principal – how often do you see principals with their door open?

Teachers also often left their classroom doors open, and during breaks, it was common for students from another teaching group to drop in to compare lessons or to ask about a concept they felt their teacher had not explained.

Through these measures, recognition became organizational. The school showed that students' presence was welcome and expected, that their learning was important, and that adults were available. In these ways, students at Virsta school were given the status of full participants in the school community.

Brantby School – recognition through relations

Like in Virsta, visibility and proximity were important parts of the pedagogical strategy at Brantby School. Every morning during field work, the principal sat in the open café area by the entrance, greeting the students and chatting with them as they started their day, and there was a sense among both students and staff that the principal knew everyone at the school.

> Brantby staff: We have a principal who sits out there too, and he knows pretty much all the students' names. He's visible; he almost never has his door closed with the red light on – and if he does, you understand that you shouldn't disturb him. It's very rare that the door is closed.

To increase visibility and accessibility, staff often took their breaks in the same environment as students. This provided a setting for informal interactions outside the classrooms, allowing relationships to develop over time.

Unlike in Virsta, Brantby school had not in the same way a negative professional discourse that needed to be reversed. Instead, the mill-town past and long distance to institutions for higher education meant that many students and their families were sceptical of the value of education. A central part of recognition work at Brantby school was therefore to build trusting relationships with homes. To this end, the "Normal Mode" also included procedures for contact with guardians. Mentors were expected to maintain close contact with homes, and parents were immediately informed if students were sent to Back-up or in case of conflicts.

This combination of concrete support, approachability, relation-work, and boundary-setting was seen as highly successful by the school staff.

> Brantby staff: There's a basic premise that the teachers want what's best for the students – and I think the students feel that. Of course, there are differences … but it's not an us-versus-them situation; the baseline is that we help each other.

Like with the "normal mode" in general, the underlying idea was that students deserve a safe and respectful work environment. The emphasis on that "teachers want the students to do well in life" highlights how relational work was understood as a compensatory resource, in which students are recognized as people with the right to care, clarity, and adult presence.

Mentoring, follow-up, and equity

Three times a year, the teachers at Brantby School reviewed all students to highlight their potential. The guiding question was: "Can s/he do more? What is needed from the student, the teachers, or the school to enable learning progress?" This focus on development is recognition as professional equity; that knowledge development is perceived as achievable for all students.

When staff highlighted differences between boys' and girls' performance and worked to involve parents in the process, recognition also became a way to challenge local norms. It was an acknowledgment that inequality is not just individual, but social and cultural.

Teachers in both schools stressed that a relational approach and a positive view of students depend on adequate time, staff, and organizational support. Teachers linked their ability to recognize each student to staffing levels, group size, and planning time. A central concern at Brantby School, was that declining resources would lead to a gradual erosion of their capacity to maintain this ability. Recognition, like redistribution, cannot only be about attitude or individual treatment. For it to be effective, recognition must be supported by material conditions. Without resources, recognition risks being merely rhetorical and amounts to misrecognition, in which institutions acknowledge individuals in words but fail to act.

Compensatory practices as representation

In Fraser's three-dimensional model of justice, representation involves giving marginalized groups a voice in decisions and norms that affect them. In schools, this means students, teachers, and local communities influencing activities. Compared to redistribution and recognition, representation was less prominent in the two schools' compensatory work and less fully realized. To some extent, this reflects the governance structure of Swedish schools, which is typically illustrated as a chain, linking the state, the municipalities (or education companies), their administrative staff, the school principals, the school staff, and the students (SOU, 2015:22, n.d.). In this governance chain, interactions largely become constrained to adjacent segments, so that teachers interact with principals and students, but not with municipal staff or state agencies. This also limits the scope for representation.

Virsta School: visibility instead of representation

At Virsta School, representation was well developed in the collaboration between school leadership and staff. An important example was the development of shared pedagogical guidelines, which was initiated by one of the senior teachers and led to a school-wide and ongoing discussion about what teaching should be at Virsta School.

In many other cases, however, the emphasis on professionalization worked against representation in decision-making processes. The school had an active students' council, but its mandate seemed rather limited. The current student president described that they had successfully lobbied to change the school lunch provider, but her friend quickly added that the quality had not improved

much. Initiatives that were more popular among the students – such as extending the cafeterias' opening hours, lengthening breaks, or having more field trips – were in turn decisively shut down by the school leadership due to pedagogical concerns.

During our fieldwork, the students successfully persuaded one of the teachers to postpone a test, giving them more time to prepare. This sudden instance of direct democracy was however not well received among the other teachers, who felt that it interfered with the collegial preparations. In this way, the strong belief in teachers' professional capacity and the priority placed on pedagogical development and joint planning to some extent worked against representation. Collaborations with parents, local actors, and other interested parties were similarly characterized by a professional distance, rather than true representation.

Still, in other ways, staff at Virsta school made efforts to include and engage. The student council thus participated with a stall during a local market day, and the art teacher organized an art exhibition together with some of the students at the nearby youth centre. In physics education, the teacher worked with student-led classes. In mathematics, a delegation of students was sent to hold a workshop on percentages in a school in a more privileged neighbourhood, boasting when they returned that they had also introduced the other students to new formats for group work. These representation efforts, however, were more focused on being present or taking part in activities, rather than making – or claiming – space in decision-making settings.

Brantby School: informal closeness

In Brantby school too, representation was the justice dimension that was least well realized. Still, since Brantby school was much more embedded in the local community than Virsta school, both external and internal hierarchies were less strict. Teachers could not help interacting with their students' families outside of school, as they were the local plumbers and electricians, tellers in the grocery store, bus drivers and nursing staff at the elderly homes, if they weren't working alongside spouses in the local factories.

As described above, the current principal had worked as a teacher in the school since the 1990s. Many of the staff had thus worked with him before he became the principal, which served to flatten the hierarchies somewhat. Other teachers thus described him as keen on including their perspectives, and being approachable. The tradition of sitting by the school entrance each morning to welcome students, and the practice of having coffee breaks in shared spaces were thus interpreted as a sign of closeness to both students and staff.

The closeness was seen in the annual "gimmick day", where students and staff dressed up, and in the renovation of the school library, which was enabled through donations of used furniture and used books from the local community, and through teachers who stayed after the school day was over to paint and redecorate.

The local embeddedness and the relational style of the school leadership thus reduced the distance between school leadership, staff, students, and their families, and opened up for dialogue and discussions. But while this closeness gave students and parents more say in Brantby than in Virsta, this influence happened through informal channels and social ties rather than through formalized or intentional representation. During our fieldwork, the student council was neither very active nor influential, and teachers' attempts at influencing local politicians to save the former upper secondary school from closing had been unsuccessful. Thus, if representation in Virsta school was largely confined to visibility, in Brantby school it was instead sidelined by an informal closeness that only partly served the same purposes, and was more haphazard in nature.

Like in Virsta, formal representation at Brantby School was primarily a matter for teachers, and in relation to pedagogical practices. The principal had thus mapped out all pedagogical initiatives that had been tried over the years, and invited the rest of the staff to decide which initiatives were serving the school's core mission of teaching, and which were not.

> Brantby staff: We ended up with a document that was at least 10 pages long, full of things that were outside what we actually need to do. And then we went through and crossed things out. Some things we wanted to keep, but we couldn't because we couldn't afford them. Some we crossed out because they were completely useless – "well then just remove it." And so we cleaned up the whole table. And in that way, [the teachers] gained an understanding of what we're actually doing – and so did I.

The teachers' experiences provided direction for what was reasonable, possible, and meaningful. This meant that the staff were not only represented symbolically, but had real influence over the organizational conditions under which the school would operate.

Discussion

In this study, we have examined how staff in a metropolitan and a rural school enact the compensatory mission of providing equitable education for all students, regardless of background and place of residence. To analyse the compensatory practices, we relied on Fraser's three dimensions of justice: redistribution, recognition, and representation.

Common themes in the two schools were a strong emphasis on quality teaching, building trust, and active professional engagement. Both schools redistributed resources to safeguard teaching through measures such as parallel scheduling, joint planning, and robust collaborative structures. This redistribution is vulnerable to changes in organization, staff, and resources. In Virsta school, redistribution rested primarily on a high degree of professionalism throughout the different categories of staff. This requires a concerted and continuous effort, since – as one teacher explained – "it doesn't matter how good my lessons are if the other lessons don't work, you need a critical mass". In Brantby school, redistribution instead rested on the fact that the school's two teaching settings – the normal mode and the back-up – were both conducive to learning and seen as legitimate by the students.

Both schools also worked with recognition in the form of affirming students as valued members of the school community. In both cases, recognition operated as a compensatory mechanism. In Virsta school, this was characterized by promoting responsibility for teaching to counteract a discourse blaming students for being unable to learn. At Brantby School, recognition was comparatively more enacted through consistent relational work, where approachability and familiarity fostered a sense of belonging and security.

In both schools, representation was primarily expressed through teacher involvement in the development process and through collaborative subject-teams that created a sense of professional ownership. This aligns with Power (2012), who suggested that reforms are only impactful when the profession has a say in decision-making. Representation of students in decision-making settings was less pronounced, as was the involvement of parents. Despite the importance of representation for ensuring fair and equal educational practices, it was thus less fully realized than redistribution and recognition practices in the two schools.

Different strategies for compensatory work?

The schools' differing compensatory strategies can be partly understood in terms of their geographic conditions. Virsta School encounters challenges common in disadvantaged urban areas, including frequent student mobility, linguistic diversity, and external social pressures. Brantby School works within the constraints typical of sparsely populated regions, including limited staff, restricted resources, and broad professional roles (Holmlund et al., 2020; Skolverket, 2025; Weir et al., 2015).

However, the analysis also shows that geography does not fully explain these differences. Internal factors, such as pedagogical orientations, leadership practices, and professional cultures, shape how each school interprets the compensatory mission. Virsta School adopts a structured, teaching-centred approach grounded in collegial norms, whereas Brantby School emphasizes relational

proximity, community ties, and organisational flexibility. These distinct logics demonstrate that compensatory work is locally constructed and cannot be reduced to a simple urban–rural contrast, a distinction sometimes implied in policy debates (Heller Sahlgren, 2021; Skolverket, 2025).

Both schools succeeded in offering compensatory teaching within existing systemic constraints. Yet, these compensatory practices were unable to address the broader structural conditions that reproduce educational inequality. Although effective in their contexts, these approaches thus remain vulnerable due to the lack of systemic support. Thus, it is important to note that redistribution, recognition, and representation cannot be confined to local-level practices. Instead, they must also be implemented at a systemic level (Fraser, 2003, 2008; Power, 2012). The professionalization of Virsta School was supported by state grants aimed at improving low-performing schools, thereby redistributing resources between schools in the urban area. Brantby School instead faced resource cuts, and also struggled to fill vacancies due to the small local labour market for high-qualified teachers. Attention to the specific conditions of rural schools is often missing in educational policies, highlighting how this lack of recognition can reduce the efficiency of redistribution.

Limitations of the study

The study demonstrates that compensatory work is a complex justice endeavour in which redistribution, recognition, and representation intersect. At the same time, it underscores a structural paradox: schools may succeed despite the system rather than because of it. This suggests that meaningful equity requires not only professional strategies at the school-level but also political action to address the underlying conditions that create the demand for compensation. This reinforces the argument that compensatory practices at the school-level remain dependent on, and limited by, structural conditions beyond the school itself.

Fraser's multidimensional theory proved productive for analysing how national compensatory aims are translated into local practice. By distinguishing among redistribution, recognition, and representation (Fraser, 2003, 2008), the framework made it possible to capture the compensatory work as simultaneously material, relational, and democratic. In this study, the three dimensions function as analytical interpretations of empirical patterns rather than as distinct categories; in practice, they overlap. For example, organisational decisions about teaching involve both resource allocation and recognition of students' needs, illustrating the fluid interaction between the dimensions.

A limitation of the study concerns the representation dimension of Fraser's framework. While the analysis captures how schools organise conditions for participation, the voices of students, particularly those from socio-economically disadvantaged or migrant backgrounds, are primarily mediated through staff accounts and observations. This raises the possibility of epistemic limitations, as the perspectives of those most affected are not directly articulated. Future research would benefit from incorporating student and parent voices to more fully assess participatory parity.

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