

From promise to capture: The limits of compensatory education and the territorial politics of equity

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Abstract

This article provides a critical analysis of the historical development and reconfiguration of compensatory education from its origins in the welfare state to its current framing within the neoliberal paradigm. Although conceived as a tool for equity, compensatory education has gradually been influenced by technocratic and performative logics that undermine its transformative purpose. The analysis is based on territorialization as the organizing structure of the compensatory education movement, within a three-part framework of justice – redistributive, recognition, and spatial. Four fundamental fractures are identified: (i) territorialization without spatial justice; (ii) the absence of coordinated redistribution; (iii) the invisibility of recognition and representation; and (iv) performative evaluation as a reproducer of inequality. Drawing on classic and contemporary authors such as Bernstein, Bourdieu, Fraser, Soja, and Biesta, the article argues that educational justice requires intersectoral policies, democratic participation, and adequate evaluation instruments. Despite the constraints imposed by the paradigm of Outcome-Based Education (OBE), it is argued that schools and territories can still serve as strategic sites of resistance and democratic reconstruction, as long as they are anchored in a substantive conception of spatial and social justice.

Keywords

compensatory education, spatial justice, territorialization, redistribution and recognition, outcome-based education

Introduction

From welfare state to compensatory education

The emergence of compensatory education in the post-war period is closely linked to the expansion of the welfare state and the conviction that schools could serve as an instrument for promoting equal educational and social opportunities (Piketty, 2013, 2020).

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It was in this broader climate of expansion and belief in education's transformative role that the compensatory education movement (Silver and Silver, 1992) emerged in the United States as an educational policy embedded in President Lyndon Johnson's 'War on Poverty' and in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Act (1964), which ended legal racial segregation (Deschenes et al., 2001). This movement expanded internationally, giving rise to programmes that, through the reinforcement of material and human resources, sought to increase the capacity of educational institutions serving populations marked by high levels of educational and social exclusion, such as Title I in United States of America, the Education Priority Areas in England, Zones d'Éducation Prioritaire in France, or Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária in Portugal (Karsten, 2006; Ferraz et al., 2019).

Thus, the emergence of compensatory education must be read in light of the expansion of the welfare state and the consolidation of a model of social citizenship, as theorized by T. H. Marshall (1950), in which education plays a central role in guaranteeing rights and combating exclusion (Beatty, 2012; Deschenes et al., 2001; Farber and Lewis, 1972; Piketty, 2020). Supported by public policies aimed at democratizing access to education, compensatory education was based on the premise that extending compulsory schooling and thereby enabling access to more qualified professional opportunities would be sufficient to promote upward social mobility and reduce socioeconomic and cultural inequalities.

However, it quickly became evident that formal access to schooling did not imply equality of outcomes, and that socioeconomic and cultural inequalities continued to strongly shape educational trajectories (Borman & D'Agostino, 1996; Vinovskis, 1999; Power, 2008; Beatty, 2012; Ferraz et al., 2018). Moreover, compensatory interventions based on localized targeting and logics of positive discrimination raised doubts about their effectiveness, as they often addressed symptoms rather than structural causes of inequality (Power, 2008; Powers et al., 2016). At the same time, these initiatives frequently failed to recognize and value the cultural resources of vulnerable groups, interpreting difference through deficit perspectives and thereby reinforcing symbolic exclusion (Bernstein, 2000, 2003; Nightingale, 2019; Power, 2008).

The neoliberal reframing of compensatory education

These unresolved inequities provided fertile ground for the neoliberal reframing of compensatory education from the 1980s onwards. The rise of neoliberal reforms has profoundly reconfigured education systems (Olssen et al., 2004). Whereas during the developmentalist period education was conceived as a social right oriented to citizenship, social cohesion, and equal opportunities (Marshall, 1950), neoliberalism redefined the mission of the school within an economic policy nexus, 'a period when education and economic policy (...) reached a point of convergence' (Sellar and Lingard, 2013: 722). In this context, compensatory education, already constrained in its redistributive ambitions, became increasingly framed through managerial logics in which funding and evaluation were tied to outcome metrics, often at the expense of territorial needs and broader forms of assessment.

Education came to be predominantly read through a human capital lens, a concept according to which investment in education should be seen as an individual strategy to increase economic productivity and gain competitive advantages in the labour market. This transformation entailed a paradigm shift: from education as a public good and social right to education as a mechanism for employability, efficiency, and economic growth (Olssen et al., 2004; Sellar and Lingard, 2013).

Within this new framework, education policies began to prioritize technical and instrumental skills, subordinating educational outcomes to global market imperatives (McKernan, 1993; Hussey and Smith, 2002), thereby recasting compensatory education as a performance-managed device

oriented primarily towards employability targets and short-cycle outcome metrics, often privileging comparability over contextual equity and territorial justice.

The paradigm of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) consolidated this performance-oriented approach, marking a shift towards a logic focused not only on the transmission of content, but also on the acquisition of knowledge and competences deemed essential for economic and civic participation, and as a result educational outcomes became associated with effectiveness, compatibility, and comparability (Friedrich et al., 2016; Mølsted and Karseth, 2016). However, this change was not always accompanied by a critical engagement with structural inequalities, maintaining a meritocratic logic that disregards students' diverse sociocultural and territorial contexts (Hussey and Smith, 2002; Nightingale, 2019).

This transformation is not neutral. By privileging an instrumental, meritocratic framing, it responsibilizes individuals for success or failure and obscures the structurally unequal conditions that shape the educational experience, particularly in more deprived territories targeted by compensatory education programmes (Deschenes et al., 2001). Moreover, the application of uniform and de-contextualized criteria penalizes mostly students from more vulnerable backgrounds and perpetuates a logic of state disengagement (Nightingale, 2019). As noted by Ball (2012: 4), 'the ongoing developments in global policy raise questions about whether more and more states are losing the ability to control their education systems – denationalization. Education policy is being 'done' in new locations, on different scales, by new actors and organizations'.

In this way, the neoliberal framework did not resolve the longstanding fractures of compensatory education, but rather deepened and reframed them within a results-driven managerial logic.

A critical agenda: Rethinking territorialization and educational justice

In this sense, this article proposes a critical analysis of compensatory education, following its historical and socio-political evolution, arguing that to recover its transformative potential, compensatory education must be rethought according to a vision of justice that is spatially situated, structurally redistributive, and culturally recognized. To this end, the concept of territorialization is mobilized not as a neutral administrative tool, but as a founding political decision and an analytical axis that allows us to question how public education policies (even those aimed at mitigating socio-economic and cultural inequalities) can contribute to maintaining or even increase the production and reproduction of inequality.

Territorialization as a political construct: Origins, logics, and analytical relevance

The territorialization of compensatory education, as it began in the United States from the 1960s onwards, was the result of political decisions made in a context of intense racial and socio-economic tensions. Instead of opting for a structural redistribution of resources across the entire territory and education system – including the equalization of funding between school territories and the adoption of intersectoral public policies – policymakers channelled compensatory efforts towards specific interventions in schools located in 'priority zones' marked by school and social vulnerability.

This 'partial' and 'localized' approach targeted at school contexts circumvents the recommendations of reference reports that pointed to a logic of redistributive intervention and family education. The Moynihan Report (1965), for example, attributed the educational failure of urban black communities to 'family disorganization', a position that was reinforced by the Coleman et al. (1966), whose dominant interpretation supported the conclusion that school performance depended more on the family environment than on the school itself. Compensatory territorialization was thus,

from the outset, a partial and fragmented response that avoided addressing the structural mechanisms of segregation and inequality (Orfield, 2001).

The consolidation of this logic had profound implications for the models of compensatory education, adopted internationally, favouring localized interventions over broad redistribution. A pedagogy of exception was institutionalized, one in which specific territories and populations became the focus of technical actions aimed at containing inequality, without altering the structures that produce it. With the rise of the OBE paradigm, this framework was reinforced by a logic of measurability and accountability, which fragments educational responses, decontextualizes success indicators, and renders invisible the material conditions of learning.

To this end, territorialization is mobilized not only as a political instrument but also as a central political decision and organizational structure – a lens through which the conditions, limitations, and contradictions of compensatory education in neoliberal contexts can be more effectively understood.

Thus, this article mobilizes the contributions of classic theorists such as [Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron \(1970\)](#), in *The Reproduction*, and [Basil Bernstein \(2000\)](#), in *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control, and Identity*, who identify the mechanisms through which schools reproduce social inequalities. These authors are complemented by contemporary academics such as [Nancy Fraser \(2009\)](#), in *Scales of Justice*, who introduces a three-dimensional framework of justice; [Edward Soja \(2010\)](#), in *Seeking Spatial Justice*, who develops the spatial dimensions of inequality; and [Gert Biesta \(2010\)](#), in *Good Education in an Age of Measurement*, who criticizes the performative pressures of standardized assessment. These authors are essential references and, complemented by other contributions, provide a solid theoretical basis for critically analysing compensatory education policies.

In this context, a central question arises: can compensatory education fulfil the objectives of social justice if it remains disconnected from a structural redistributive strategy, spatial justice logic and performative evaluation? This article is based on the hypothesis that, having been absorbed by a technical and meritocratic paradigm, compensatory education remains trapped – oscillating between the promise of equity and the inability to realize it – and, in doing so, paradoxically reinforces the very mechanisms of exclusion it originally sought to dismantle. In any case, it is essential to point out future paths on which territories and schools must assume themselves as spaces of resistance and democracy.

Theoretical framework and methodological approach

This article is grounded in a critical and interdisciplinary approach, situated at the intersection of the sociology of education, political theory, and critical policy analysis. Rather than following a traditional empirical methodology, the study adopts a theoretical-analytical framework aimed at interrogating the ideological, structural, and spatial dimensions that underpin the evolution and reconfiguration of compensatory education policies in neoliberal contexts.

In this sense, this study is developed as a theoretical-analytical intervention based on document analysis and critical synthesis. The selection of sources was made according to the following criteria: (i) substantive relevance to compensatory education and its dimensions of justice (redistribution, recognition, and spatial justice); (ii) diversity of areas of knowledge (sociology of education, critical politics, philosophy/ethics, and spatial theory); and (iii) consideration of temporal spaces in which relevant socio-political and educational transitions took place (expansion of social welfare, neoliberal turn, and OBE paradigm). The analysis combines abductive reasoning (identifying the four fractures based on recurring frailties in the literature/policy record) with theory-driven deduction

(Fraser's triad; Soja/Massey's spatiality) to construct categories linking objectives, instruments, and territorialization.

The research strategy is based on a dialectical reading of policy discourses, institutional arrangements, and normative frameworks, drawing from a wide range of sources including peer-reviewed academic literature, historical reports, supranational policy guidelines (OECD and European Commission), and national legislative texts. This corpus is not treated descriptively but analysed intertextually and critically, with the aim of exposing the continuities, tensions, and contradictions between the formal rhetoric of equity and the operational logics of performativity and containment that characterize compensatory education today.

The article engages in multiscale analysis, linking macro-level transformations (e.g. shifts in welfare regimes and global education governance) to meso- and micro-level policy mechanisms, such as territorial targeting, resource allocation, and school evaluation. The concept of territorialization is mobilized not merely as an administrative tool but as a structuring device that reveals the spatial politics of inequality. This analytical choice enables a situated critique of how educational policies are both shaped by, and help to reproduce, geographies of exclusion (Harvey, 2005; Olssen and Peters, 2005).

Anchored in critical theory, the article draws on the work of authors such as Bourdieu, Bernstein, Fraser, Soja, and Biesta to articulate an integrated justice framework – redistributive, recognitional, and spatial – capable of questioning both the normative assumptions and the material consequences of compensatory education. Rather than seeking generalizable conclusions, the aim is to illuminate structural dynamics and open space for alternative, justice-oriented policy imaginaries.

Key tensions in contemporary compensatory education

The critical analysis of compensatory education reveals that, despite its stated intentions to promote equity, its implementation has consistently been marked by structural limitations that undermine its transformative potential. In this article, territorialization is adopted as the organizing structure and conceptual anchor for examining the interdependencies between redistributive justice, recognition, and assessment. As a foundational political decision, territorialization helps illuminate the ways in which these three dimensions are articulated – or disarticulated — in the operationalization of compensatory education within the OBE framework.

Drawing on this analytical axis, the study identifies four major fractures that compromise the effectiveness of compensatory policies:

1. The territorialization of education without spatial justice.
2. The absence of a coordinated redistributive strategy.
3. The invisibility of recognition and representation.
4. The technocratic capture of school assessment.

The four fractures identified are not sequential; on the contrary, they form a feedback loop that is reinforced by supranational structures, such as European and national qualifications frameworks. These qualifications frameworks, designed to increase transparency, comparability, and mobility through learning outcomes, end up imposing uniform criteria that ignore local socio-cultural circumstances and contexts, thereby exacerbating the vulnerabilities of populations, particularly the most disadvantaged, and intensifying the disconnect between territorialization and spatial justice.

This continuous gap between territorialization and spatial justice can be observed in various national contexts where compensatory education has been translated into programmes: in the United

States, with Title I; in France, with the Zones d'Éducation Prioritaire; and in Portugal, with the Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária. Compensatory education programmes have been built on the basis of localized interventions without a redistributive logic; through the designation of priority territories with positive discrimination logics, socially exposing and accentuating the vulnerability of communities; in addition, these programmes have shown modest results and have therefore been the target of criticism practically since their inception (Wilkerson, 1965; Vinovskis, 1999; Karsten, 2006; Bénabou et al., 2009; Ferraz et al., 2019). These initiatives have become even more fragile under evaluation regimes that favour the comparability and standardization of learning outcomes at the expense of sensitivity to local contexts, which results in the reinforcement of the isolation of disadvantaged territories without considering new strategies for redistribution, recognition of local communities, and substantive coordination for spatial justice.

These cases provide a better understanding of the feedback logic underlying the four fractures of compensatory education: territorialization identifies priority areas for intervention, but without robust and adequate redistribution; redistribution is limited to short-term commitments rather than structural changes; the recognition of cultural diversity is maintained under a deficit social hierarchy; and evaluation restricts educational objectives to quantifiable references. The modest and often disappointing results of these programmes, already evident before the consolidation of OBE, demonstrate that compensatory education has long struggled to fulfil its emancipatory promise. Neoliberal and technocratic restraint did not create these limitations, but institutionalized them, incorporating them into managerial structures that prioritize efficiency and comparability over territorial justice and democratic recognition.

These fractures are deeply interwoven and mutually reinforced, contributing to the capture of compensatory education by a technocratic, decontextualized, and symbolic rationality. As various critical scholars have argued, this model not only relocates the responsibility for structural inequalities onto schools but also absolves political institutions of their duty to redistribute resources and reimagine the normative foundations of educational justice (Power, 2008; Powers et al., 2016).

These findings are presented in the form of four critical categories, each of which reflects both the key obstacles and the potential avenues for reconfiguring compensatory education under the OBE paradigm. Together, they aim to map the tensions, omissions, and contradictions that shape current compensatory frameworks, and to explore possibilities for reclaiming their original commitment to justice.

Territorialization and the failure of spatial justice

The territorialization of education policies has been presented as an option that aims to bring decision-making closer to local contexts, promoting a response that is more sensitive to socio-territorial specificities. This narrative became particularly visible during the emergence of compensatory education, as experimental, short-term programmes focused on specific contexts gave way to large-scale interventions. Although the selection of 'priority' territories was justified by the need to mitigate or even solve socioeconomic and spatial inequalities, doubts arose from the outset as to their effectiveness and the legitimacy of the intentions behind them (Harvey, 2005; Olssen and Peters, 2005).

Since then, territorialization has proved to be an ambiguous and contested decision: while it has ensured the political visibility of localized vulnerabilities, it has also transformed the territory into a space for partial and technical interventions diverting attention from the structural dynamics that reproduce inequality. This focused approach is not merely technical, but political: by favouring specific interventions in 'pockets' of vulnerability, it abandons a systemic logic of territorial

redistribution capable of responding to educational needs throughout the system in a coordinated and equitable way.

As Gewirtz (2001) and Ball (2003) have shown, educational decentralization promoted in the name of efficiency, innovation, and proximity is often accompanied by asymmetrical accountability. Without commensurate institutional capacity, autonomy, or funding, local actors are overburdened and poorly supported, so instead of empowering local contexts, decentralizing reforms often preserve strategic control at the centre, transferring operational responsibilities to under-resourced territories.

For a better understanding of the persistent contradiction between the normative objectives of equity and the technical instruments used to achieve them, it is essential to turn to conceptual frameworks that question the way inequality is organized spatially and governed politically. The notion of spatial justice, as developed by Edward Soja (2010) and Doreen Massey (2013), challenges the assumption that territory is a neutral or passive container of politics by revealing how space is actively produced through power relations that shape not only access to resources but also institutional recognition and representation. As Soja (2010: 104) argues:

[The idea that] geographies and histories are socially produced and not simply given to us by god or nature leads to an awareness that the geographies in which we live can have both positive and negative effects. They can provide advantage, and opportunity, stimulate, emancipate, entertain, enchant, enable. They can also constrain opportunity, oppress, imprison, subjugate, disempower, close off possibilities. In our terms, geographies or spatialities can be just, as well as unjust, and they are produced through processes that are simultaneously social and spatial, subjective and objective, concretely real and creatively imagined.

Based on this critical spatial reading, Robertson and Dale (2008) have shown how contemporary governance regimes, especially under neoliberal rationalities, resort to territorial differentiation as a control mechanism. Thus, compensatory education programmes, rather than correcting inequality, often function in a context of unequal political geographies as instruments of containment that stabilize rather than transform structural exclusions.

From this perspective, the educational space is not neutral when it comes to implementing policies, but a terrain with a historical and political heritage that is fundamental to consider, moulded by power relations that condition access to resources, services, and recognition. Given this heritage, the classification of schools into 'priority' areas, although legitimized by references to inequality, often reinforces representations based on the deficit of entire territories (Wacquant, 2008; Lipman, 2013).

Vulnerabilities therefore cease to function as a redistributive criterion and territories become institutionalized identities, marked by stigma and administrative surveillance. This change reflects a broader transformation in public policies, away from approaches aimed at social equity and structural repair, and towards management logics focused on efficiency, measurement, and accountability. This transformation is most evident in the consolidation of the OBE paradigm, promoted by supranational organizations such as the OECD and the European Union, which imposes a logic of comparability and standardization that neutralizes territorial specificities (Grek, 2009; Sellar and Lingard, 2013). This change can be understood through what Bob Jessop (2005:33) calls 'entrepreneurial city':

The prime goals of post-war economic policy (full employment, stable prices, economic growth, and a sustainable balance of payments) can no longer be delivered in and through the national state. This in turn undermines the national state's capacity to deliver redistributive social welfare and limit the degree of social exclusion. In this sense, the post-war economic and political regime has failed and, if cities and regions are to

escape the consequences of this failure, it is essential to modify economic strategies, economic institutions, modes of governance, and the form of state. These must be re-designed to prioritise 'wealth creation' in the face of international, inter-regional, and intra-regional competition since this is the prior condition of continued social redistribution and welfare. Such narratives lead, inter alia, to the discovery of the entrepreneurial city as a new phenomenon and its presentation as inevitable on practical, if not normative, grounds.

In this model, territories are governed as units of economic performance, designed to attract investment and institutional visibility. The territorialization of education, instead of being structured around democratic and community decision-making, becomes an instrument of territorial marketing, for which compensatory education contributes to generating positive indicators and not to mitigate or solve the structural bases of inequality.

What we see, therefore, is that territorialization does not serve the purpose of being a strategy for achieving greater social justice, but rather for the differentiated management of exclusion. As [Harvey \(2005\)](#) warns, neoliberalism operates through 'accumulation by expropriation', a process in which public goods, social rights and collective resources are taken from communities and transformed into profit-generating assets. With regard to education, this is evident because it aims to transform marginalized areas into spaces of symbolic extraction framed as 'priority zones' to legitimize public action, but simultaneously subject to containment mechanisms. Therefore, and as already mentioned, instead of enabling redistributive justice, this logic manages deprivation through corrective and technocratic interventions.

Reclaiming territorialization as a strategy for equity requires re-inscribing it within a horizon of substantive spatial justice, one capable of articulating positive discrimination, intersectoral planning, binding community participation, and effective local autonomy. Only under these conditions can compensatory education move beyond its role as a spatialized mechanism for inequality management and instead assert itself as a situated policy of transformative social justice.

Social justice and compensatory education: Between redistribution, recognition, and representation

The implementation of large-scale compensatory education programmes has not always been grounded in robust empirical evidence, nor has it enjoyed conceptual consensus. In 1965, [Wilkerson \(1965: 438\)](#) expressed concerns that the expansion of experimental initiatives into broader policies risked being either unjustifiably optimistic or prematurely dismissed. As he noted:

This unfortunate 'state of the art' is likely to encourage contradictory yet equally premature trends in educational decision-making. On the one hand, unduly optimistic interpretations of apparent but limited 'gains' among participants in pilot projects may reinforce tendencies toward long-term commitments to compensatory programmes whose validity has yet to be established. On the other hand, the lack of clear evidence that some programmes significantly improve participants' development may strengthen tendencies toward the abandonment or even outright rejection of the entire compensatory education concept. Neither of these approaches is warranted by the available research findings.

In addition to the lack of scientific evidence to support the expansion of experimental compensatory education projects, broader questions persisted about the most effective strategies for addressing structural inequalities. Debates around the ideal model for achieving equal opportunities

accompanied the expansion of the compensatory education movement and the programmes it inspired.

The Coleman et al. (1966) warned of the importance of curbing expectations that schools alone would solve deep-rooted inequalities, instead considering the need for more equitable societies capable of allowing all families access to quality education. This principle is in line with the central argument of Rawls' Theory of Justice (1971), which advocates a redistributive strategy to ensure that individuals are not disadvantaged by the territory in which they were born or by their socio-economic background. However, in contrast to Rawls' more abstract conception of 'primary goods', theorists such as Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) and Bernstein (2000, 2003) have emphasized the centrality of social structure, habitus, and cultural capital, highlighting how schools often reproduce, rather than combat, systemic inequalities.

While several critical theorists were sceptical about the ability of education systems alone to promote structural transformations, the Plowden Report (1967) presented a more optimistic and reformist vision. Based on a child-centred philosophy of education, it positioned the school as a central agent of social change, advocating pedagogical innovation, participatory learning environments, and the emotional and social development of children as strategies to promote equity.

Offering a complementary but more refined perspective, Amartya Sen (1995) shifts the debate centred on the distribution of resources to the expansion of freedoms and, although he shares Plowden's (1967) concern about creating conditions that favour children's development, Sen reformulates the objective: instead of ensuring equal material provision, the aim should be to design institutional arrangements that strengthen individuals' capacities to live the lives they want. This capability-based approach deepens the equity discourse by placing agency and the interaction between structure and individual freedom at the forefront. As Sen writes:

The exclusive focus on achievements has recently been seriously challenged by arguments for basing political evaluation on the means to achievement, such as the Rawlsian concern with the distribution of 'primary goods', the Dworkinian concentration on the 'distribution' of resources, and so on. Since the means in the form of resources, primary goods, etc., undoubtedly enhance the freedom to achieve (other things remaining the same), it is not unreasonable to think of these moves as taking us towards freedom – away from attention being confined exclusively to evaluating achievement. If we aim at equality on the space of resources or of primary goods, this can be seen as moving the evaluative exercise towards the assessment of freedom (Sen, 1995: 33).

This shift from focussing on resources (inputs) or measurable results (outcomes) to assess the actual freedoms and capacities of individuals challenges traditional redistributive approaches and performative and outcome-based models, suggesting that justice in education should be assessed not just by the resources that are provided or the results achieved, but by what people are actually able to do with what they have at their disposal within their specific social and cultural context. Young (2008) reinforces this shift away from a distributive paradigm, arguing that while oppression is often reproduced through a lack of material resources, it is also reproduced through institutionalized patterns of cultural devaluation, political exclusion and marginalization based on certain groups. For this reason, justice requires more than equal access, and it requires a structural transformation in the way institutions recognize and respond to social difference.

This tension between formal equality and structural injustice is particularly evident in the design and implementation of compensatory education programmes which, although they have different national socio-economic contexts, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, and Portugal, tend to converge around common structural logics. These logics include forms

of territorialization, positive discrimination, and targeted support for specific populations such as ethnic minorities, immigrant students, and those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Karsten, 2006; Power, 2008; Bénabou et al., 2009; Ferraz et al., 2019). It should be added that, although in different political cultures, these programmes are linked by a technocratic emphasis on mitigating visible disparities, often through spatially delimited and demographically focused interventions.

Although these initiatives recognize the existence of structural inequalities, they often fall short of guaranteeing a holistic response. Instead, they tend to promote fragmented and localized intervention measures that neglect broader redistribution and recognition strategies, perpetuating structural inequalities. An alternative integrated framework would combine the material circumstances of families (Coleman et al., 1966; Rawls, 1971) with a focus on the institutional and pedagogical capacities of schools to respond to the diverse needs of students (Bernstein, 2000, 2003; Power, 2008). This dual perspective would allow for a more equitable and context-sensitive formulation of compensatory policies, capable of addressing not only access, but also active participation and educational justice.

Nancy Fraser (2009, 2020) offers a three-dimensional theory of justice – redistribution, recognition, and representation as complementary and fundamental elements for correcting structural injustice. On this basis, economic inequality, cultural marginalization, and political exclusion are not separate issues but interdependent ones: economic redistribution alone, for example, cannot achieve justice if not accompanied by cultural visibility and institutional participation.

Although Fraser (2009, 2020) offers a fundamental perspective for questioning institutionalized inequalities, Crenshaw (1989) and hooks (1981, 1994) have broadened this critical perspective. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality demonstrates how these dimensions of injustice are not only interrelated but are also experienced simultaneously and unequally across territories, arguing that systems of race, gender, and class oppression converge to produce specific vulnerabilities that universalist or 'single axis' frameworks, such as those established in compensatory education, often fail to understand or address. This criticism is reinforced and deepened by bell hooks (1981, 1994), who warns that policies aimed at inclusion can, in practice, reinforce intra-group hierarchies unless they are based on a radical and genuinely intersectional politics, pointing out that without an explicit challenge to patriarchy and racial capitalism, interventions run the risk of reproducing privileges within marginalized groups, for example, prioritizing the needs of black men to the detriment of black women or erasing the specificities of queer and working-class experiences.

Together, these critical theories demand not only the need to consider redistribution, recognition, and representation but also a reflexive and situated approach capable of recognizing how injustice is experienced at the intersections of structural inequality and identity-based oppression. Despite these criticisms and conceptual contributions, the core logic of compensatory education programmes has remained largely intact: centred on the school as the main site of intervention, sidelining the social structures that shape educational trajectories. As empirical studies have shown, the results of compensatory education programmes have been inconsistent and often disappointing, reinforcing doubts about the effectiveness of the dominant policy strategy (Karsten, 2006; Power, 2008; Bénabou et al., 2009; Powers et al., 2016; Ferraz et al., 2019).

In this context, the framing of compensatory education within the OBE paradigm has further weakened its emancipatory potential by prioritizing performance metrics, normalized results, and management accountability. The OBE overlooks broader ethical and political considerations, that is, instead of addressing the conditions of inequality, OBE merely evaluates its visible consequences. Therefore, a reconfiguration of compensatory education oriented towards justice requires going beyond technical performance and adopting a multidimensional and intersectoral conception of

justice. Without a change that operationalizes redistribution, recognition, and joint representation, compensatory education will continue to fall short of its transformative promise, paradoxically reproducing the very exclusions it aims to mitigate.

Educational assessment as a site of justice and inequality

In recent decades, school assessment has become the central mechanism of educational governance, consolidating its role as a key instrument for guiding, legitimizing, and monitoring public policies, something that is particularly evident in the context of OBE. According to [Gert Biesta \(2010\)](#), this performative logic reduces the purpose of education to a qualification function, emphasizing the acquisition of measurable skills for employability to the detriment of its socializing and subjective functions, which are essential for a democratic and humanist education. In this sense, performativity transforms schools into results-oriented organizations, subject to a culture of accountability based on rankings and external references ([Ball, 2003](#); [Biesta, 2010](#); [Lingard, 2010](#)). Therefore, this culture is not neutral: it determines what counts as success and who has the authority to define the validation criteria.

Building on Ball and Biesta's criticisms, [Apple \(2013\)](#) warns that the rise of performative logics in education is inseparable from broader processes of marketization, management control, and cultural subordination. Performativity is not just a technical change in the way schools are assessed; it reflects a deeper transformation in the aims of schooling, aligning it with labour market logics and reducing its public, critical, and democratic dimensions. This is reinforced by [Torrance \(2012\)](#) who adds that performance-centred assessment schemes help to narrow the curriculum, reduce pedagogical diversity, and consequently reinforce social exclusion, particularly among pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. By favouring standardization and decontextualized benchmarks, these models reproduce entrenched inequalities rather than mitigating them.

However, the problem lies not only in the performative nature of assessment but also in the lack of assessment tools that recognize and respond to the structural diversity of educational contexts, not least because non-performative assessment approaches, if designed inappropriately, run the risk of reproducing the very mechanisms of exclusion they aim to combat.

On this basis, and as [Bernstein \(2000, 2003\)](#) demonstrates, the dominant linguistic and assessment codes tend to value culturally specific forms of expression, penalizing students whose communicative repertoires and life experiences do not fit in with the dominant norms of the school. Assessment, even when it is intended to be equitable, inevitably reflects cultural, epistemological, and political choices about what is relevant to learn and how learning should be assessed. As [Meadows and colleagues \(2025\)](#) remind us, assessment is always a socially situated act, shaped by worldviews, conceptions of justice, and power structures.

Furthermore, in the context of compensatory education, the labels given to schools, such as 'priority' or 'at risk', often based on low educational performance, tend to consolidate deficit representations of entire communities and, this stigmatization feeds symbolic and material disinvestment, legitimizing technocratic and short-term interventions that ignore the deeper structural conditions of exclusion ([Lipman, 2013](#); [Wacquant, 2008](#)).

Thus, the challenge is not to oppose performative assessment to an abstract 'ideal' model, but to rethink the role of assessment within policies of equity. In a context where educational justice continues to be shaped by technocratic instruments, reconstructing assessment as a democratic and redistributive tool is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for releasing compensatory education from its current impasse.

Conclusion

This article offers a critical reading of compensatory education as a mechanism of social justice, entrenched between the promise of equity and its appropriation by technocratic and performative logics. Through an analysis of its redistributive, recognition, and spatial dimensions, it is shown that compensatory education has been progressively instrumentalized as a mechanism for the selective management of inequality, often stripped of its emancipatory intent.

Territorialization, as the founding structure of compensatory policy, incorporates an intrinsic contradiction: on the one hand, it allows for the recognition of spatial inequalities and promotes forms of positive discrimination; on the other hand, when not aligned with a strategy of structural redistribution and intersectoral public policies, it functions as a device for labelling and containing inequality. In the OBE paradigm, this tension thickens under the regime of the ‘entrepreneurial city’ (Jessop, 2005), in which territories are governed as performance units, geared towards attracting investment, institutional visibility, and international benchmarking. In this framework, compensatory education is often mobilized to meet short-term objectives and feed metric-driven prestige systems, rather than underpinning a substantive commitment to social justice.

Performative assessment, as an expression of the OBE paradigm, reinforces this logic by translating structural inequalities into metrics of school effectiveness. However, the absence of quantification and standardization is not, in itself, a guarantee of justice; it only moves assessment towards the pole of arbitrariness. Without shared and transparent criteria, assessment depends on the subjectivity of the assessors, who, as Bourdieu and Bernstein have shown, tend to reproduce the dominant habitus and culturally valued linguistic codes. Thus, the critique of performativity must be contextualized, not as a rejection of evaluation, but as a call for tools that combine rigour, contextual awareness, and epistemological inclusion (Meadows et al., 2025).

As formulated here, educational justice requires an ethical and political reconfiguration of compensatory education, inspired by Fraser’s three-dimensional theory of justice, that coherently integrates redistribution, recognition, and representation, which implies not only a review of compensatory mechanisms but also a reimagining of the public school model itself in a neoliberal context.

A central question remains: should territorialization continue to serve as an operational criterion for compensatory education if it is reconfigured and framed within a broader strategy of spatial and social justice? Or should it be progressively replaced by universalist policies that guarantee equity according to the needs of the territories, without resorting to labelling and stigmatization?

The proposals advanced below seek to address this dilemma by reframing territorialization within a systemic strategy of redistribution, recognition, and spatial justice, rather than abandoning it or leaving it to operate in isolation. It is considered essential that compensatory education be urgently considered from the perspective of publicness and ‘justice now’ (Biesta et al., 2021; Papastephanou et al., 2020).

In practical terms, the demand for compensatory education as a project of social and spatial justice requires concrete institutional arrangements in three dimensions: diagnosis, implementation, and evaluation. These dimensions should be guided by the following action plan: (a) the development of broad territorial diagnoses that capture both vulnerabilities and potentialities in all regions, sub-regions, municipalities, and schools, and that inform coordinated strategies in the short, medium, and long term; (b) a redistributive logic that mobilizes human and material resources across the entire territory and the education system, in proportion to differentiated needs, thus avoiding the stigmatization of ‘deprived’ areas and promoting sustained coordination between the state, schools, and local communities; (c) the design of plural and robust assessment tools that combine quantitative

and qualitative dimensions, monitor progress over time, ensure comparability, and remain sensitive to local contexts. Together, these measures would help shift compensatory education away from fragmented containment towards a systemic orientation towards redistribution, recognition, and spatial justice.

Even in this challenging scenario, educational actors are not powerless. Schools and territories, far from being passive recipients of top-down policies, can and must reclaim their role as spaces of democratic resistance, pedagogical experimentation, and the rehumanization of education. Recovering this agency demands political clarity, institutional courage, and the formation of democratic coalitions that actively challenge managerial containment and enact justice-oriented, transformative practices. In doing so, compensatory education may yet be reimagined not as a mechanism of mitigation, but as a project of social and spatial emancipation.

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