



Collaborative governance as a lever for educational and territorial development in marginal areas. Empirical insights from an embedded & mission-oriented research project in the Casentino Inner Area

Luca Grisolini – PhD Student – luca.grisolini@unifi.it

INTRODUCTION

Over the last ten years, the growing interconnection between international frameworks for sustainable development, place-based cohesion policies and national regulations on horizontal subsidiarity has supported new forms of collaborative governance. These practices have gradually spread to the fields of education and training, enabling formalised arenas of collaborative governance in which institutional, economic and social actors are called upon to strengthen the educational offer with a focus on quality, equity, inclusion and sustainability.

This trajectory intersects with the increasingly active role of researchers within Public Administrations, recognized at the European level as key actors in facilitating change processes, and implies their greater involvement in institutional capacity building and collaborative governance pathways. In this context, the researchers' contribution goes beyond knowledge production and takes on embedded and mission-oriented forms: they participate directly in the design, experimentation and monitoring of policies, working alongside local actors to steer decision-making processes toward shared goals of social impact and territorial transformation

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT OF RESEARCH

This research is part of the doctoral programs promoted by the Ministry of Universities and Research under Ministerial Decree of April 9, 2022, No. 351, which—through resources from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR)—funds innovative doctorates dedicated to strengthening and transforming public administration. More specifically, the project develops a collaborative research initiative in the Casentino valley (Tuscany), aimed at strengthening the administrative capacity and territorial governance of educational and cultural policies. Its mission-oriented and embedded core is a placement within the local *Unione dei Comuni Montani*, which allows the researcher to enter the authority's decision-making and organisational processes, to observe in depth the system context and practices in place, to analyse the factors that enable or hinder concertation processes and to co-design and co-construct, together with local stakeholders, innovative tools for collaborative governance

The expected impacts were aimed at strengthening the role of the *Conferenza Zonale per l'Educazione e l'Istruzione* of Casentino in governing the entire policy cycle, by providing shared tools to read territorial needs and make more informed and coordinated decisions. At the same time, they aimed to generate reflections, operational models and governance documented and transferable for supporting the replicability of processes and results

OPPORTUNITIES

The research period coincided with the entire activation cycle of the Casentino Territorial Educational Pact, which emerged from the implementation of SNAI 2014–2020 interventions and entered its official concertation and design phase in February 2023. This process led, in May 2024, to the adoption of an act that innovatively proposes a redefinition of territorial educational governance compared to previous experiences, along four main lines: 1) the formal opening of competent institutional actors to co-programming territorial education policies; 2) the large extension, on an inter-municipal basis, of the range of stakeholders involved; 3) the enhancement of cultural heritage as an educational device and lever for sustainable development; 4) the perspective orientation toward life-long and life-wide learning.

IMPLICATION OF INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT OF RESEARCH

Mission Oriented and Embedded Research

OBJECT OF RESEARCH

Process of collaborative definition and implementation of Territorial Educational Pact

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH STRATEGY

Single Embedded and Longitudinal Case Study informed by comparative insights from other inner areas of Tuscany

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: Integrative framework for Collaborative Governance (Emerson e Nabatchi, 2015)

PEDAGOGICAL LENSES:

1) democracy as educational experience; 2) organizational learning; 3) transformative learning; 4) community of practice; 5) collaborative governance competencies

AIM	DESCRIPTION AND TIMEFRAME	RESEARCH ACTION	MAIN FINDINGS AND DELIVERABLES
1	Understand how the system context and the enabling/constraining drivers shape the emergence and evolution of the CGR within the Casentino Educational Territorial Pact. <i>november 2022 - april 2023</i>	Multi-level policy document analysis Desk analysis of secondary and OSINT data; Participant observation (Active Membership); Targeted interviews and conversations with key informants (public officials and administrators).	Framework of the System Context of Casentino: 1) Resource and service conditions; 2) Policy, legal and institutional frameworks; 3) Socioeconomic and cultural characteristics; 4) Network characteristics and prior relationships; 5) Political dynamics and power relations. Identification of drivers and obstacles in the initial phase (Uncertainty; Interdependence; Consequential incentives; Initiating leadership).
2	Analyse the collaboration dynamics in the initiation (<i>november 2023 - april 2024</i>), deliberation (<i>april 2023- may 2024</i>) and implementation phases of the Pact (<i>july 2024- july 2025</i>)	Participant observation (Complete Membership); Targeted interviews and conversations with key informants	Analysis of the main collaborative dynamics of the Pact (principled engagement, capacity for joint action and shared motivation) Initial profile of collaborative competences. Identification of levers and weaknesses in the capacity for joint action (S.W.O.T.)
3	Develop proposals to strengthen the impacts and adaptation of collaborative governance dynamics and the overall governance regime of education in Casentino. <i>june 2024 - July 2025</i>	Participant observation (Complete Membership) Targeted interviews and conversations with key informants; literature review around: 1) competence frameworks and tools to sustain collaborative governance regimes; 2) monitoring tools for the implementation of the Pact.	Proposals for interventions to embed the Pact into institutional governance structures, including the shared monitoring tools. Set of recommendations for each of the four thematic working tables, aimed at strengthening collaborative decision-making processes, improving inter-institutional coordination, and supporting the operational functioning of the overall governance regime. Proposals for training actions and self-assessment/self-orientation tools designed to support collaborative capacity and the effective use of the monitoring devices.

The research shows that activating innovative governance arenas in the educational sector requires long timeframes, ongoing negotiation between institutional levels, and the stable presence of public actors who can facilitate the pursuit of shared goals in a context that is simultaneously characterised by strong civic engagement and a consolidated habit of concertation, yet affected by discontinuities, a lack of dedicated resources, and a high fragmentation of the actors involved.

In this scenario, a key challenge concerns the strengthening of the competences of all stakeholders. The analysis of existing public policies and participatory processes highlights specific needs in terms of 1) policy-making, 2) horizontal leadership, and 3) collaborative governance competences, pointing to the necessity of designing targeted training activities and support devices capable of consolidating these competences and monitoring the evolution of the process over time, thereby sustaining the effectiveness and legitimacy of the Educational Pact in the territory.

From this perspective, the embedded, mission-oriented doctoral researcher assumes a strategic role: being stably embedded in governance processes, they are called upon to contribute both to the systematic observation of collaborative dynamics and to the co-design of such training and monitoring devices, acting as a hinge between the research community, public administrations, and the educational community.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1) Ansell C., & Gash A. (2008). *Collaborative governance in theory and practice*. Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 18 (4), 543–571.
- 2) Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: SAGE
- 3) European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (2023). *Futures of science for policy in Europe – Scenarios and policy implications*, Publications Office of the European Union.
- 4) Emerson K., Nabatchi T., Balogh (2012.). *An Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance*. Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 22 (1), 1–29.
- 5) Emerson, K., & Smutko, L. S. (2011). *UNCG guide to collaborative competencies*. Portland, OR: Policy Consensus Initiative and University Network for Collaborative Governance.
- 6) McGinly, R., & Salokangas, M. (2014). Introduction: 'embedded research' as an approach into academia for emerging researchers. *Management in Education*, 28(1), 3-5
- 7) Del Gobbo G. (2021). *Professioni educative in evoluzione per lo sviluppo locale* in G. Del Gobbo, P. Federighi (2021). *Professioni dell'educazione e della formazione. Orientamenti, criteri e approfondimenti per una tassonomia*. Firenze: Edit
- 8) Morse R.S. & Stephens J.B (2012.) *Teaching Collaborative Governance: Phases, Competencies, and Case-Based Learning*, Journal of Public Affairs Education, 18:3, 565-583
- 9) Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (Vol. 5). Sage.

Researching with conscience.
Ethics as the foundation of knowledge.
10-12th December 2025



INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH

RESULTS