

Democratizing Education through Community Participation

Two institutional cases from Italy and Chile

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The Central Paradox

Collaborative governance arrangements risk becoming symbolic rather than substantive - *declarations of principle confined to the rhetorical level while institutional inertia persists.*

Ansell & Gash (2008); Osborne (2010)

Declared vs. Enacted

Policy texts promise participation
— implementation falls short

Formal vs. Substantive

Structures exist but communities
remain consultative, not decisional

Rhetoric vs. Practice

Institutional inertia
persists beneath reform discourse

Why Compare Italy and Chile?

Italy

- Tradition of state centralisation
- School autonomy reforms (1999–2015)
 - still incomplete
- Territorial governance exists but it is fragmented
- Community Educational Pacts (bottom-up, project-based)

Chile

- System historically shaped by marketization (1980)
- Significant process of public re-embedding (2017)
- Territorial governance through Local Public Education Services (SLEPs) — top-down institutional design

Despite different starting points → both seek to reconnect schools with communities, against dominant market or bureaucratic logics

Theoretical Framework

1

Education as a Common Good

UNESCO (2015, 2021): shift from public good to common good -- shared governance, co-responsibility, democratic participation (Locatelli 2024, 2025)

2

Collaborative Governance

Shift from NPM to NPG (Verger et al. 2026; Osborne 2010; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2017): collaboration, networking, territorial coordination -- with persistent tensions between reform intentions and market logics (Ansell & Gash 2008; Emerson et al. 2012; Verger et al. 2019)

3

Critical Policy Analysis

Policies are not implemented -- they are enacted. Analysis of the gap between policy text and practice across institutional contexts (Ball 1994; Young & Diem 2017)

Methodology

Qualitative Comparative Policy Analysis

*Bartlett & Vavrus (2017); Young & Diem (2014) -- processual, not variance-oriented:
traces how similar democratization objectives emerge through distinct institutional pathways*

Units of analysis

IT Community Educational Pacts (Patti
Educativi di Comunità)

CL Local Public Education Services — SLEPs

Three dimensions

Governance architecture · Forms of participation (Arnstein 1969/2019) · Territorial coordination

Sources

Normative & legislative frameworks · Ministerial guidelines · Empirical studies · Secondary evidence

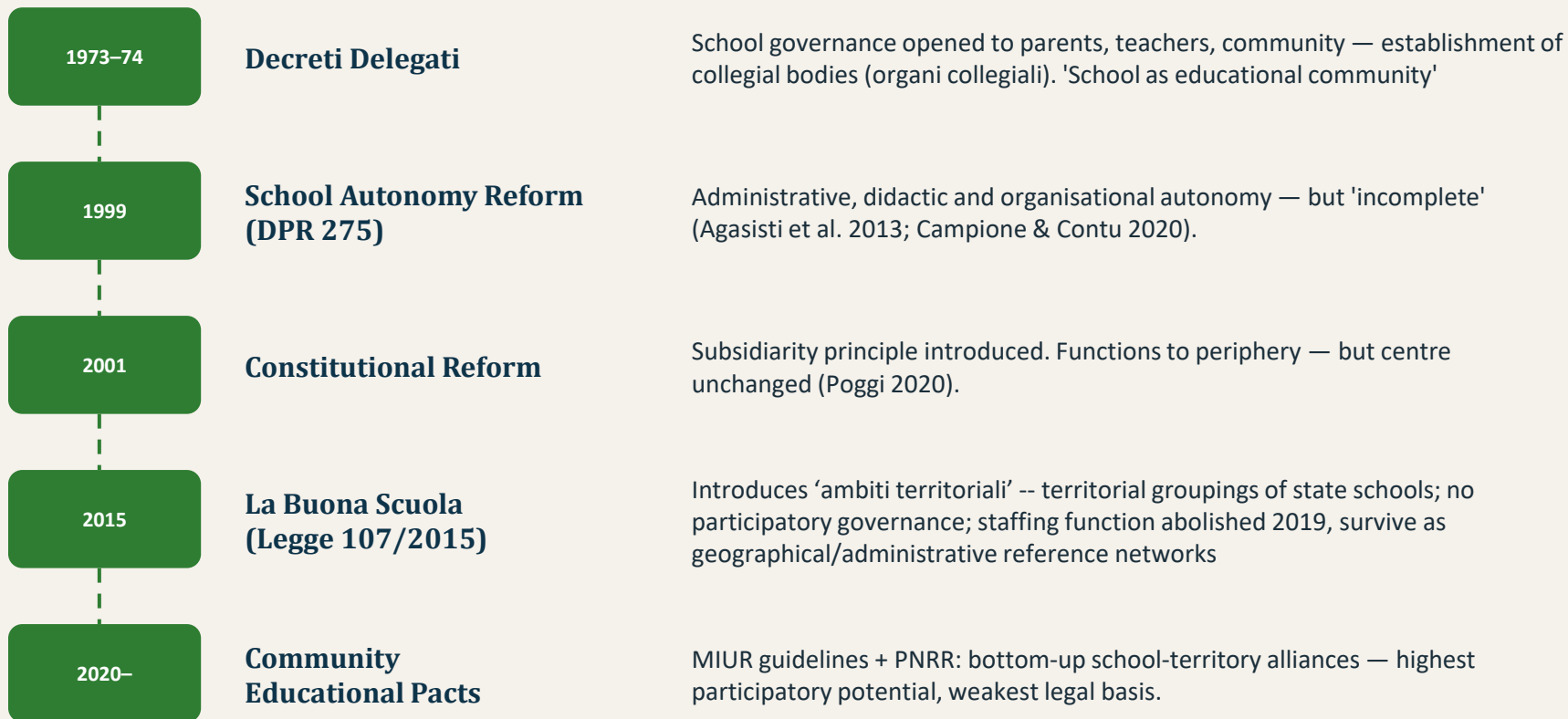
IT Key sources

INDIRE & ForumDD (2022) — 676 pacts
MIUR 2020; PNRR
Locatelli (2024, 2025)

CL Key sources

Ley 21.040 (2017); DEP documents
Leiva-Guerrero & Benavides (2024)
Donoso-Díaz (2021); Carrasco (2025)

Italy: Structural Context



Italy: Community Educational Pacts

Formal alliances between schools, municipalities, third sector and communities — grounded in education as a common good (Locatelli 2024, 2025)

Legal & policy framework

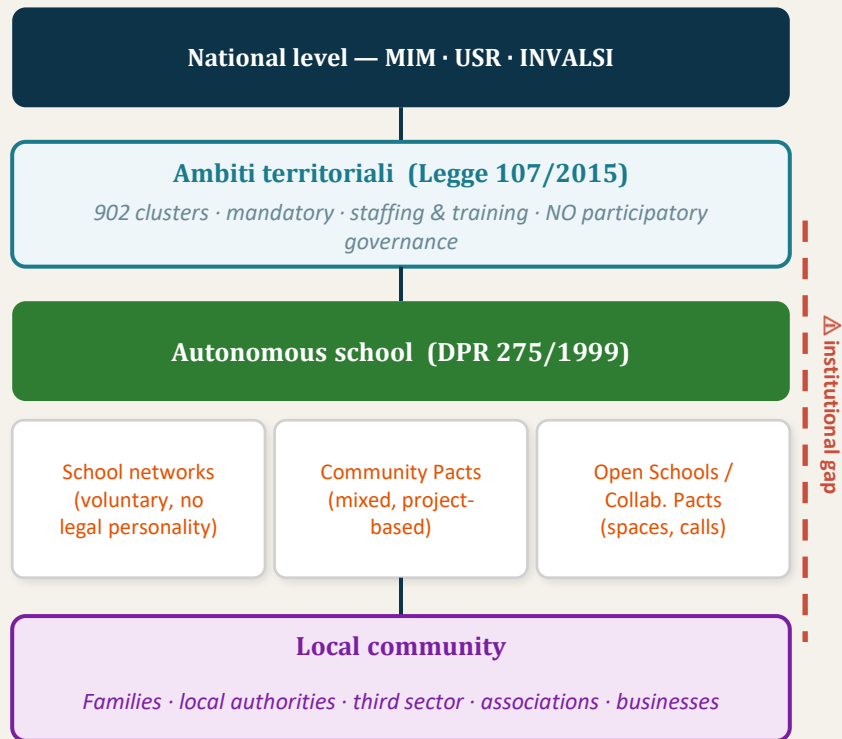
- DPR 275/1999 — school autonomy: schools can form alliances with local actors
- MIUR Guidelines 2020 — first explicit reference to Patti Educativi di Comunità
- PNRR 2021–2026 · Piano Scuola 2022 — funding instrument (not legislative basis)

State of play (INDIRE & ForumDD 2022; Locatelli 2025)

- 676 pacts documented in ~half of Italian regions — likely present more widely
- Low complexity (single project) · medium (structured) · high complexity (governance change, ~24%)
- Concentrated where social capital already exists — less present in fragile territories

No stable legislative framework — guidelines only, not binding · survival dependent on project funding

Level 4 tools (networks, pacts, open schools) have no legal personality or dedicated resources: they represent a project-based response to the institutional gap between clusters and local community



Italy: The Governance Instruments — A Structural Paradox

Instrument	Legal basis	Coverage	Continuity	Participatory governance
Ambiti territoriali	Strong (L. 107/2015)	Universal	Hollowed out (L. 145/2018)	ABSENT
School networks (Reti di scuole)	Medium (DPR 275/1999)	Partial	Variable	Limited
Community Educational Pacts (Patti Educativi di Comunità)	Weak (Guidelines only)	Partial	Funding-dependent	Potentially HIGH
Collaboration Pacts (Patti di Collaborazione)	Medium (Art. 118 Cost.)	Partial	Variable	Limited (spaces only)
Open Schools (Scuole Aperte)	Weak (Calls/bandi)	Partial	Funding-dependent	Absent

The most universal instrument (ambiti) has the weakest participatory governance — exactly the gap that Chile's SLEPs try to fill

Chile: Structural Context



Chile: Local Public Education Services (SLEPs)

70 SLEPs planned (58 active, 2026)

Specialised public bodies replacing municipalities: legal personality, own budget, territorial mandate (Ley 21.040, 2017)

Participatory Architecture (Ley 21.040, Art. 5 & 7)

Consejo Local de Educación Pública

Advisory body on local education planning

2 student reps · 2 parent reps · 2 teachers · 2 education assistants
2 school management reps · 1 university rep · 1 technical institute rep

Comité Directivo Local

Strategic oversight and accountability

Representatives of municipalities, regional government, parents

Participation Unit (per SLEP)

*Community engagement & territorial
networking*

Territorial coordination unit — linked in national network

What Policy Texts Promise: Declared Principles

Italy — Key Policy Documents

MIUR Guidelines (2020) · Legge 107/2015 · DPR 275/1999 · Art. 118 Cost.

Subsidiarity

Horizontal and vertical: schools, municipalities, civil society share educational responsibility

Educational co-responsibility

School, family and community as equal partners in the educational process

Education as a common good

Schools as civic centres of community; learning as shared endeavour beyond classroom walls

Educating community (Comunità educante)

Formal + non-formal + informal learning integrated through territorial alliances

Chile — Key Policy Documents

Ley 21.040 (2017) Art. 5 & 7 · Ley 20.370 (2009) · Primera Estrategia Nacional NEP (2020)

Collaboration & networking

"Ongoing and systematic cooperation among constituent institutions" — schools, health, sports, culture, private sector (Art. 5)

Local relevance & diversity

Educational projects must reflect the identity, needs and interests of each community (Art. 7)

Guaranteed participation

"Participation of educational communities must be guaranteed and promoted" — right to information, organisation and expression (Art. 7)

Shared accountability

Move beyond punitive accountability toward collective responsibility for educational improvement (Carrasco 2025)

Both systems declare strong participatory principles → How do these translate into practice?

Comparative Analysis

Dimension	IT Italy	CL Chile
Governance architecture	Intermediate tier (ambiti) exists but with no participatory mandate or dedicated resources; Community Pacts fill the gap on a project basis	Structured: 70 SLEPs with legal personality, budget, mandate
Design logic	Governance by default — voluntary, project-based (Campione & Contu eds. 2020)	Governance by design — top-down institutionalisation (Donoso-Díaz 2021)
Community participation	School invites community as external partner (Epstein-style involvement)	Formal bodies include community reps — but advisory, rarely decisional
Arnstein positioning (1969/2019)	Symbolic rather than substantial participation	Participation without power: consultative, rarely decisional (Leiva-Guerrero & Benavides 2024)
Territorial coordination	Strong where social capital exists; systemic gap in fragile areas	Territorially mandated but implementation uneven (urban/rural gap)
Critical tensions	Funding dependency; missing institutional tier; two-speed system	Bureaucratic overload; accountability vs. market logics persist

Convergence: A Shared Challenge

Both cases seek to reconnect schools with communities — against dominant accountability and market-oriented logics — yet participation remains symbolic

Governance by design vs. by default

Chile institutionalised the intermediate tier; Italy left it to voluntary initiative. Both face a participation-practice gap — suggesting the problem is not just architecture.

The missing common good logic

Community educational pacts (Italy) and SLEPs (Chile) both gesture toward education as a common good — but accountability logics (SIMCE in Chile; INVALSI in Italy) pull in the opposite direction.

Democratisation as a cross-system challenge

The democratization of school governance is not the product of a single institutional model. It is a challenge that cuts across very different political and educational traditions.

Discussion: What the Comparison Reveals

The Italy paradox

The most universal and permanent tool (ambiti territoriali) has the weakest participatory governance. The richest community engagement (Patti Educativi) is the most funding-dependent and fragile.

The Chile paradox

SLEPs represent an unprecedented institutional investment in territorial governance — yet fail to break fully with competitive and standardised accountability logics that continue to crowd out community voice.

Systemic constraint

In both cases, participation is primarily understood as 'involvement' (Carmelo Galio, 2025): students and parents are invited to support school agendas, not to co-define educational purposes.

Toward genuine co-governance

Moving from symbolic participation to citizen power (Arnstein) requires not just institutional design but a cultural and epistemic shift: recognising communities as knowledge-holders and co-producers of education.

Conclusions

- 1 Formal participation structures remain symbolic rather than substantial — consultation and placation — rather than genuine citizen power
- 2 The gap between participatory rhetoric and practice is not solved by institutional design alone (Chile) nor by community initiative alone (Italy)
- 3 Education as a common good requires governance arrangements that treat communities as co-producers, not external partners — a cultural shift as much as an institutional one
- 4 The comparison suggests that democratizing school governance is a systemic challenge that cuts across different political traditions — and that bottom-up movements (Pinguinos, Patti Educativi) are often more transformative than top-down reform

Open Questions & Future Directions

IT Italy: Redesigning the institutional architecture

Could ambiti territoriali become the legal promoters and coordinators of Community Educational Pacts — giving the most universal instrument a genuine participatory mandate? This would require a legislative reform that finally closes the gap between institutionalisation and participation.

CL Chile: Harmonising institutions and purposes

SLEPs operate within a system where competing logics pull in opposite directions: SLEPs promote democratic, territorially-rooted governance — while the Quality Agency enforces high-stakes testing and the Preferential School Subsidy (SEP) embeds market-based accountability. Genuine democratisation requires convergence of purposes and instruments across the system.



Theoretical-empirical research agenda

Exploring the relationships between autonomy, subsidiarity and community participation — situated within the broader debate on schools as public goods, common goods, or quasi-market services. How do different conceptions of educational quality shape the space available for genuine co-governance?

Thank you

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