

Governance in Learning Cities in Italy. Evaluation Report

La governance delle Learning Cities in Italia. Il Rapporto di Valutazione

Paolo Federighi^a, Arne Carlsen^b, Raúl Valdés-Cotera^{c,1}

^a *Università degli Studi di Firenze*, paolo.federighi@unifi.it

^b *Unesco Institute for Lifelong Learning - Former Director*, carlsenarne@gmail.com

^c *Unesco Institute for Lifelong Learning*, r.valdes-cotera@unesco.org

Abstract

This report evaluates the experience of Italian Unesco Learning Cities, focusing on governance processes and lifelong learning strategies. Through dialogic interviews with representatives from Italian learning cities, the study identifies the key added value of the initiative while highlighting existing structural obstacles. The document emphasizes the need to shift from a narrative of best practices toward data-driven impact measurement. In conclusion, it suggests transforming learning into a core municipal function by adopting simplified administrative solutions – such as subsidiarity pacts – and strengthening cooperation with the private sector to ensure the sustainability and resilience of local policies. The study concludes by proposing the implementation of management and quality control systems for local lifelong learning policies.

Keywords: territorial governance; lifelong learning; shared administration; quality of local policies.

Sintesi

Questo rapporto valuta l'esperienza delle Unesco Learning Cities italiane, focalizzandosi sui processi di governance e sulle strategie di lifelong learning. Attraverso interviste dialogiche con i rappresentanti di learning cities italiane, lo studio identifica sia il valore aggiunto che gli ostacoli strutturali più significativi. Il documento sottolinea la necessità di passare da una narrazione di buone pratiche a una misurazione dell'impatto basata sui dati. In conclusione, si suggerisce di trasformare l'apprendimento in una funzione municipale fondamentale, adottando soluzioni amministrative semplificate, come i patti di sussidiarietà, e rafforzando la cooperazione con il settore privato e con le imprese per garantire la sostenibilità e la resilienza delle politiche locali del lifelong learning. Il rapporto si conclude con la proposta di adottare sistemi di gestione controllo della qualità delle politiche locali del lifelong learning.

Parole chiave: governance territoriale; apprendimento permanente; amministrazione condivisa; qualità delle politiche locali.

¹ This piece of paper was edited by Arne Carlsen and Paolo Federighi in cooperation with Barbara Di Grazia. Discussion is by Raúl Valdés Cotera.

1. Methodological premise

The object of this report is the evaluation of the experience of Italian Unesco learning cities, essentially focused on the governance processes of lifelong learning policies. The specific objective is to understand the obstacles to and the possibilities for strengthening institutional governance capacities.

The initiative was promoted within the framework of the decision by the Municipality of Lucca to organise, in agreement with the Unesco Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), an Evaluation Seminar on the experience of Italian learning cities.

The evaluation process was carried out through the following stages:

- Definition of hypotheses for interpreting the experience of learning cities, starting from the analysis of the main developmental phases of the idea and based on the reconstruction of the historical path²;
- The evidence presented in the programme stems from a cycle of interviews conducted with an open and dialogic method. This methodological choice was dictated by the need to explore the dynamics of Unesco Learning Cities not as static data, but as evolutionary processes. This method does not consider the interviewer as a neutral observer, but as a co-participant who facilitates the emergence of the

² In Italy, the history of the concept of territorial planning corresponds to the modern idea of the Learning City. It dates back to the 1950s and 1960s, specifically to initiatives undertaken by international organisations in the southern regions of the country. These policies formed the basis of the most significant regeneration project promoted by the OECD for the European Mediterranean countries as a whole. The “Mediterranean Regional Project” was a revolutionary undertaking for the growth policies of those years. The OECD approach operated on a functional paradigm, placing education and training at the service of economic and social development strategies.

In 1974, Italy established “School Districts” (*Distretti scolastici*) across the entire national territory. In these districts, educators, entrepreneurs, association representatives, and local politicians were tasked with planning educational interventions integrated with the economic and social development plans of homogeneous territorial areas, which included several neighboring municipalities.

It was not until regional disparities were defined as a hindrance to the realisation of the European Internal Market that the centralised management of planning was finally overcome. The actual reform of the European Structural Funds dates back to 1988. European Heads of State and Government adopted an action plan that allowed for the doubling of Structural Fund resources between 1987 and 1992. With this first reform of the structural funds, a field of conceptualisation, research, experimentation, and implementation developed, which would later facilitate the elaboration of urban development plans.

This is, in brief, the historical and cultural context within which the Unesco Learning City idea has been integrated.

The Learning City concept was officially born in 2013 following the emergence of two key documents within Unesco: the “Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities: Lifelong Learning for All, Promoting Inclusion, Prosperity and Sustainability in Cities” (UIL, 2013), which defines their role in promoting inclusion, prosperity, and sustainability, and “Key Features of Learning Cities” (UIL, 2014), which provides the general framework of Learning Cities. In fact, Unesco began developing the Learning City concept in 2011, thanks to the work of Arne Carlsen and Jin Yang.

interviewee's subjective experience through a free and non-directive communicative flow. The dialogic approach was chosen to overcome the limits of predefined categories, allowing for the exploration of the complexity of "Learning Cities" through the direct narrative of the protagonists. This made it possible to bring out institutional nuances and administrative obstacles that a rigid structure would have inevitably filtered out. The interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached, i.e., until new dialogues no longer contributed new elements to the understanding of the phenomenon;

- The technique used was based on the definition of a map of themes used as a flexible guide. The interview process utilised the "Probing" technique: questions arose from the interviewee's responses;
- The results of the interviews were subject to full transcription and subsequently to thematic analysis;
- In this report, quotations are presented to reflect statements made by participants directly involved in the implementation of learning cities activities. Each quotation is attributed to the relevant Learning City. Quotations are distinguished by the use of quotation marks and the absence of source references;
- An initial report was drafted and then subjected to verification during a restricted Seminar for representatives of Italian Learning Cities.

Representatives from the following learning cities took part in the interviews: Brescia, with the participation of Alba Bonetti, Anna Frattini, Anna Maria Finazzi; Cividale del Friuli, with the participation of Angela Zappulla, Giorgia Carlig; Fermo, with the participation of Carlo Nofri (statements are taken from his speeches at the final Seminar); Lucca, with the participation of Paola Angeli; Palermo, with the participation of Aurelio Angelini; Trieste, with the participation of Valentina Bonazza and Michela Stefani; Turin, with the participation of Pier Giorgio Turi (statements are taken from his speeches at the final Seminar).

2. The added value of the Learning Cities project

The common added value is the model's ability to *give meaning and a common framework* to a myriad of daily actions, transforming the public administration from a simple provider of sectoral services into a coordinator of a territorial learning ecosystem.

Below are the main strengths identified:

- *Systematisation of the existing*

This is a highly shared strength. The Learning City model acts as an "umbrella" under which to gather fragmented activities:

- Brescia: It allows for mapping and making visible "the value the city already offers", making systemic what was previously episodic;
- Lucca: The added value is "systematising and strengthening what was already happening", gathering activities from different departments under a single strategic framework, in synergy with local stakeholders;
- Trieste: The goal is to bring consolidated activities (reading, recreation centers, science) under the Unesco methodological framework to give them coherence.
- Turin: Recognition was integrated into a natural and consolidated system of

public-private collaboration, the result of great attention to the educational system present in the city since the 1970s.

- *Paradigm shift: from sectoral policies to an integrated vision*

Joining the network pushes administrations to break down bureaucratic “silos”:

- Brescia: The project facilitates dialogue between sectors of public administration usually thought of as vertical units. This makes recognisable a political and economic investment in education topics that sometimes, in other agendas, do not seem to be a priority;
- Cividale del Friuli: The strength was the transition from sectoral policies to an “integrated vision”, where culture becomes a transversal educational infrastructure touching welfare, environment, and economic development;
- Fermo: Joining means opening up to a “glocal” vision and gaining a different point of view that allows for verticalising attention, placing the city in a context that moves from local to regional, national, and international;
- Lucca: The creation of a “control room” (cabina di regia) that allows for the “orientation” – in relation to opportunities/activities put in place both by the territory and various municipal sectors – of the individual skills of the offices for a global lifelong learning strategy.

- *Strengthening of Identity and Visibility*

The Unesco “brand” confers authority and international recognition to local policies:

- Brescia: Recognition gives dignity to “invisible work”, such as 0-6 years education, positioning it within world standards;
- Palermo: The added value is the enhancement of its historical identity as a “city of welcome”, transforming multicultural tradition into a political learning strategy for migrant inclusion;
- Trieste: Belonging to the network makes local policies “more significant and recognizable at an international level”, facilitating comparison with other realities;
- Turin: Keeping the recognition alive means operating simultaneously on four levels: local, regional, national, and international. Although there are no offices exclusively dedicated to this, Turin has created a structure transversal to various sectors to manage this mandate.

- *Participatory Governance and Collaboration Pacts*

Being a Learning City facilitates the involvement of civil society through innovative legal instruments:

- Cividale del Friuli: It has allowed for the strengthening of governance with the third sector and associations, making processes such as the “River Contract” participatory;
- Fermo: Rather than purely top-down (often difficult) or bottom-up (sometimes inconclusive) management, the value lies in the co-design method, with moments of intense consultation between Learning City actors and political decision-makers;
- Lucca: It utilised the institution of “Active Citizenship” to draw up a Collaboration Pact that binds over 130 partners (schools, voluntary sector, etc.) to common goals. In particular, the agreement was entered into on the basis of

the “Shared Administration” Regulation, which was approved by the Lucca City Council in the spring of 2017 (Lucca City Council, 2017) and developed through a participatory process;

- Turin: The presence of an academic system and foundations (such as Compagnia di San Paolo, which supports the “city of education” project) guarantees economic resources that allow educational policies to be addressed systemically.
- *Awareness and Methodological Self-reflection*

The analysis process required by Unesco pushes municipal staff to reflect on their own work:

- Brescia: Defines the process as “extremely democratic” because it is based on self-reflection guided by clear indicators, which help in understanding if objectives are being met;
- Cividale del Friuli: Detailed investigation based on the methodology of the Region and the Institute of Sociology provided the “stimulus to understand that we were capable of changing”;
- Turin: After ten years of work on the “enabling conditions” of governance in a European dimension, the city is reaping concrete fruits, also in terms of attracting economic resources.
- *Transformation of cultural heritage into educational infrastructure*

In cities of art, the added value is the repurposing of cultural heritage:

- Cividale del Friuli: The strength is the idea of “Permanent Educational Infrastructure”, where assets like the “Lombard Temple” are not just monuments, but active places of teaching for schools, the disabled, and the elderly throughout the year.
- *Strategies for continuity and networking*
- Brescia: Formalising a structured network among cities can highlight local commitment to education. It is desirable to involve ANCI (National Association of Italian Municipalities), perhaps through its Education Commission, to organise in-depth sessions and seminars (similar to those already conducted on “open schools”) specifically aimed at cities with Learning City recognition;
- Cividale del Friuli: It is fundamental that the Learning City method enters permanently into the city’s strategic planning, so that it can be replicated and maintained even in the face of political changes;
- Fermo: The challenge of administrative discontinuity linked to 5-year electoral cycles must be managed. For this reason, it is necessary to consider “project-based” funding of a regional or national nature, overcoming the limits of local resources alone.

3. Recurring obstacles, “Areas for Improvement”

Although each city has its own peculiarities, common critical issues preventing the full implementation of a Learning City strategy can be grouped into five main categories:

- *The “Tyranny” of Daily Administration*

This is a recurring obstacle, mentioned by several municipal administrations:

- Absorption of resources: The administrative machine is described as being “sucked into a vortex of daily activities”, deadlines, and bureaucratic requirements, often imposed by higher-level regulations or other bodies (Europe, State, Regions);
- PNRR pressure: The implementation of projects related to the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP/PNRR) has literally diverted focus and resources, including human resources, forcing “monitoring and development strategies for Learning Cities to be set aside” (as highlighted by Trieste). From a technical-administrative perspective, the PNRR has also been seen as an opportunity to systematise skills, although it poses the question of whether the Italian system can withstand such weights without rethinking administrative organisation (Turin). The significant opportunities of the PNRR directed organisational choices, leading to the establishment of specific offices for the acquisition and reporting of funds, influencing staff recruitment (Lucca);
- For cities affected by the 2016 earthquake (Fermo), reconstruction funds allowed for the recovery of not only social but also educational spaces, although there remains poor institutional visibility of the Learning City network compared to other networks (e.g., Creative Cities) in accessing ministerial grants.
- *Lack of Expertise and Specific Professional Profiles*

All cities emphasize how the skills needed for a Learning City do not coincide with traditional Public Administration ones:

- Bureaucracy-focused competitive exams: Profiles sought in municipalities are historically administrative-accounting or technical. A figure specifically dedicated to lifelong learning is missing;
- Professional compartmentalisation: Staff have excellent skills in educational and school services or culture, but lack specific training to coordinate transversal strategies. Administration, however, cannot internally possess all the advanced professional skills necessary for innovation, which require particular skills often not provided for in classic organizational charts (Turin);
- Brescia: The city chose to enhance existing staff by seconding a figure from pedagogical coordination and specifically training them in participatory design for Learning Cities;
- Lucca: The expertise gap can be overcome by investing in profiles already present (pedagogues, psychologists, social workers), but an effort is needed to raise the bar toward adult education and relationships with businesses.
- *Difficulty in Inter-sectoral Coordination*

A Learning City requires different offices to work together:

- Sectoral policies vs. Integrated Vision: Cividale and Brescia point to the overcoming of fragmentation and vertical “silos” as the main challenge. Transversality is facilitated when related sectors (sport, youth, childhood) fall under a single councillor and physical location, but becomes complex with distant sectors like culture and environment. It is fundamental that convergence is both technical and political to give authority to the processes;
- Lack of a Control Room: In Lucca, it is highlighted that an internal structure

exclusively dedicated to lifelong learning is often missing;

- Turin: The structure of the City of Turin is considered a rare case as it is equipped with an intersectoral mandate that allows for the connection of various policies, overcoming the natural resilience of vertical models.

- *Absence of Monitoring and Evaluation Systems*

Cities struggle to move from “narrating good practices” to “measuring results”:

- Unused Unesco Indicators: There is a lack of detailed evaluation of how individual initiatives satisfy the 43 Unesco indicators;
- Brescia: Distinguishes between evaluation of activities (done regularly) and impact evaluation, defining the latter as an extremely difficult challenge to include in the context of Learning Cities;
- Lucca: Proposes an effort to identify a few but significant indicators that provide concrete feedback on the perceived utility by the territory, given that administrations are already measured daily for performance and transparency;
- Cividale del Friuli: Entrusted an external company to create a replicable method in every sector, suggesting that strategic planning should be an objective officially adopted by the administration.
- *Financial and Staffing Limits*
 - Reduced budgets: Cividale highlights how the management costs of a Learning City are difficult to sustain for small municipal budgets;
 - Fermo: To overcome staffing limits, the city adopted a mixed formula: outsourcing some functions and creating a public-private association for co-design and sponsor involvement. It is vital to activate the “critical mass” of social volunteering and associations to “bring to the ground” the administration’s intentions.

4. Administrative obstacles

Cross-sectional analysis of the interviews shows that obstacles are not linked to a lack of political vision or local activity, but to structural blocks in the municipal “machine”. Below are the main administrative obstacles identified in the survey:

- *Fragmentation by sectoral objectives*

This is the most cited obstacle. Municipal administrations are divided into watertight departments (Culture, Social, Education, Environment) that struggle to communicate.

- The problem: A Learning City strategy requires transversality, but administrative procedures are programmed for sectoral objectives;
- Example (Lucca/Cividale del Friuli): Functional overlaps are encountered: multiple offices work on the same target or the same objective without coordination, risking a waste of human and instrumental resources;
- Turin and Brescia: they highlight how the vertical structure is resilient to change and how a strong political will (and ideally coordination under the General Manager) is needed to give authority to transversality.

- *Lack of Specific Expertise in Staff*

There is a gap between the skills required by Unesco and those present in municipal

workforces.

- Rigid competitive exam procedures: As highlighted in the Trieste interview, public exams are focused on administrative-accounting profiles and knowledge of the Consolidated Law on Local Authorities (Italian Legislative Decree, 2000);
- Absence of pedagogical/strategic profiles: Personnel with specific training in lifelong learning governance or innovative project management are missing. Skills are strong in traditional services (nurseries, schools), but vanish when it involves designing for adults, NEETs (not in education, employment, training), or the elderly in an integrated view;
- While Lucca suggests enhancing existing pedagogical professionals, Turin warns that innovation requires external skills often not provided for by current regulations.
- *The “Tyranny” of Deadlines*

Paradoxically, the current abundance of funding has become a brake on long-term strategy. The administrative machine is calibrated for a certain volume of resources.

- Workforce absorption: In Trieste, it is highlighted how the management of calls related to the PNRR has essentially “sucked” offices into a vortex of administrative requirements and national deadlines, indispensable to avoid revocation of funding. Lucca also mentions this;
- Sacrifice of vision: Monitoring and evaluation activities for Learning Cities are set aside because they are considered less “urgent” than reporting on European and national funds.
- *Absence of a Permanent “Control Room”*

Many cities complain about the lack of an office or dedicated figure acting as a constant link.

- Interruption of processes: If the strategy depends only on the enthusiasm of a single councillor or manager, it risks stopping at a change of mandate or in the face of administrative emergencies;
- Lack of overarching coordination: In Lucca, the absence of structured internal planning is highlighted, capable of monitoring the entire activity plan and effectively coordinating requests from different stakeholders (over 130 for the Lucca Pact).
- *Difficulty in Monitoring and Evaluation Systems*

Current administrative procedures do not provide for tools to measure the impact of learning on the city.

- Poor use of indicators: It is admitted that no detailed evaluation exists of how initiatives satisfy Unesco indicators;
- Resistance to guidelines: The attempt to standardise administrative acts (e.g., inserting the Learning Cities logo and specific objectives in every resolution) is often ignored by technical offices, making systematic data collection at year-end impossible;
- The transition from activity evaluation to impact evaluation is considered the most complex obstacle, requiring a collective effort to identify simple but effective indicators (Lucca, Trieste, Brescia).

- *Budget Limits in Small Municipalities*

For realities like Cividale del Friuli, the obstacle is purely dimensional.

- Imbalance between ambition and resources: Having a budget calibrated for 10,000 inhabitants makes it difficult to fund permanent educational infrastructures that would require management costs of a medium-sized city, forcing the Municipality to depend entirely on regional or European calls;
- Fermo confirms the importance of external calls, suggesting however that the creation of mixed public-private networks and associations can activate otherwise dormant human and financial resources.

5. In summary

- *Added Value*

Added value is not seen as “new services”, but as a magnifying glass that enriches the city’s identity and verticalizes its attention in a global perspective.

- Systematisation: The Unesco framework allows for gathering fragmented activities (libraries, museums, sport, social) under a single strategic vision;
- Paradigm Shift (Integrated and Glocal Vision): the value is moving from “sectoral policies” to a vision where cultural heritage becomes a transversal educational infrastructure. Furthermore, membership allows for the adoption of a “glocal” vision, inserting the city into a regional, national, and international network context;
- Identity and International Recognition: the Unesco brand confers authority and facilitates comparison; this requires operating constantly on four dimensions (local, regional, national, international);
- Democracy, Participation, and Co-design: the value is in the “self-reflective” method and the ability to make visible the “invisible work” of education. Additionally, the value of co-design through intense consultation between social actors and political decision-makers must be considered;
- Economic Synergies and Resources: Turin highlights how added value also resides in the ability to attract large foundations (e.g., Compagnia di San Paolo) to support systemic educational policies.

- *System and Context Barriers*

These are obstacles linked to the historical period, institutional visibility, and the management of financial flows.

- The “Dictatorship” of Urgency (PNRR): the critical issue of the bureaucratic burden that “cannibalizes” strategic vision remains;
- Lack of a Lifelong Learning Culture: The challenge remains making people understand that adult and NEET education is a lever for economic development. For this reason, it is necessary to shift attention from basic services to wide-ranging training paths involving the business world as well;
- Imbalance between Ambitions and Dimensions: For small municipalities, the obstacle is the management scale. In many cases, the solution is outsourcing functions and creating mixed public-private associations to activate human resources and private funding;

- **Institutional Visibility:** it is necessary to strengthen the recognition of the Learning City network at the ministerial and institutional levels, to avoid the exclusion of these realities from specific funding granted instead to other networks (e.g., Creative Cities). A turning point identified by Brescia, Fermo, and Turin is the need for formalisation of a structured network among Italian Learning Cities, possibly also through ANCI, to elevate the topic of education to a national political priority and facilitate the exchange of good practices (e.g., “open schools”);
- **Political Discontinuity:** The five-year nature of administrative mandates creates the risk of process interruption. The challenge is inserting the Learning City method into strategic planning so that it becomes independent of changes in administration.
- *Administrative Obstacles*

Technical and structural blocks preventing the strategy from becoming fully operational.

- **The “Silo” Structure (Vertical vs. Horizontal):** Lucca, Cividale del Friuli, Turin, and Brescia emphasise the resilience of vertical structures. Turin represents an exception with its transversal structure, while Brescia highlights that technical transversality must be supported by equal political transversality to have authority;
- **Lack of Specific Expertise and Innovative Skills:** Traditional competitive exams do not provide for the necessary pedagogical or project management profiles. Turin observes that the administration cannot be equipped with all professional skills; Brescia suggests more creativity in calls, and Lucca proposes retraining existing technical-pedagogical staff;
- **Absence of Monitoring and Impact Evaluation:** The ability to measure real impact is missing. Brescia defines impact evaluation as “challenging and complex”, while Lucca suggests starting with small significant indicators to provide concrete feedback to the territory.

6. Comparison with specialised literature

The analysis conducted on Italian cities captures the operational and administrative dimension (the “how” a Learning City is managed in Italy). However, if we compare these results with international scientific literature (Unesco, 2014, 2013; studies by OECD, studies by Longworth, 1999; 2006; and others) and with world-class experiences (such as Cork, Medellín, or Korean cities), some areas emerge that the literature considers fundamental pillars, but which in Italian interviews show a peculiar application or are in a phase of evolution.

Below are the comparison points:

- *The role of the private sector and businesses*

In the literature on Learning Cities, the involvement of businesses and employers is considered a fundamental pillar (Pillar 3: Unesco, 2014). Cities must activate policies that favour learning within local businesses and, at the same time, ensure that companies can become “knowledge providers” for the citizenship.

Some realities show advanced integration between the economic system and learning.

- Fermo: The relationship with the economy is materialised in specific projects, such as the training of tourism operators for welcoming people with communicative disabilities. This intervention, funded by the Ministry of Disability, aims to improve the productivity of an entire economic sector through targeted learning;
- Turin: Through the Turin City Lab project, the city transforms into an innovation laboratory open to companies. The inclusion of an “Educational” axis allowed for the activation of economically relevant projects in which operators in the supply chain experiment with products and solutions in a Learning Lab logic, linking Lifelong Learning directly to the productive economic system.
- *Digital Inclusion and the use of Big Data*

The literature insists on the Smart Learning City and the use of real-time data; Italian experiences demonstrate a transition toward Data-driven governance in response both to the need for critical digital literacy and the use of Big Data to guide educational policies.

The Italian experience provides some examples of this type of intervention:

- Brescia: The city is working intensely on data for long-term planning. Tools like the Gender Budget (constantly updatable by offices) and the Neighborhood Atlas allow for photographing demographic indicators and education levels by neighborhood, using statistical data as a basis for educational policies. The use of Artificial Intelligence for future projections is also being evaluated, and projects with the University for digital education across all age groups are being implemented;
- Cividale del Friuli: Digital transition is applied internally to facilitate the relationship with the citizen (e.g., ChatBot) and extends to health and education topics, using tools like bonuses to raise awareness about sport;
- Turin: In collaboration with the Links Foundation, the Polytechnic, and Cielo, Turin has launched research on next-generation tools to manage digital data and advanced geographic mapping (GIS) crossing territorial and alphanumeric data, with the goal of making this system available to the national network of learning cities.
- *Economic impact indicators and “resilience”*

International literature often correlates Learning City status with local Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the attraction of investments, noting how a measurable correlation between learning and reduction in unemployment or the birth of startups in Italian cities is often missing.

The Italian experience provides some examples of this type of intervention:

- Cividale del Friuli: highlights how numerous initiatives have a direct economic impact and a tangible commercial following. Concrete examples are the Palio di San Donato and the musical perfection courses, which attract students from all over Europe, transforming educational and cultural activity into a driving force for local trade and tourism;
- Fermo: Highlights the need for financial instruments allowing for action over a wider territory (area vasta), avoiding local learning policies coming into conflict with other municipal policies.
- *The concept of “Learning Neighborhoods” (Proximity learning)*

Literature suggests that learning works best when it is “hyper-local” (neighborhoods, civic centers). Often the focus remains on the central offices of the Municipality rather than the neighborhood cell.

The Italian experience provides some examples of this type of intervention:

- **Brescia:** The Neighborhood Atlas approach responds exactly to this need, segmenting data analysis and policy programming street by street, analysing specific needs (e.g., density of children or women’s educational qualifications) neighborhood by neighborhood.

7. Initial elements of reflection for strengthening international strategies

- *Premise*

The indications arising from the evaluation of the experience of Italian learning cities should be more deeply compared with similar evaluation paths conducted in other cities. This would allow for better elaboration of indications for the entirety of learning cities.

Here we limit ourselves to some annotations that are as general as they are imprecise. Learning cities are diverse entities. They vary according to the context of administrative and constitutional law regarding decentralisation (and as is known, in Europe alone, multiple models exist: from pure or masked centralisms, to Swedish municipalism, to formal and limited regionalisation, to real federalism). But they also vary by demographic size and level of economic and social development, as well as by participatory models (from imperfect democracy to illiberal democracy).

For this reason, we limit ourselves to eight synthetic outcomes to be developed and a single operational recommendation to be validated.

- *Summary of main outcomes*

The main indications concern:

- **Adopting a Lifelong Learning Policy:** It is necessary for lifelong learning to be recognised as a fundamental function of the Municipality (on par with social services or urban planning) and not as an optional activity;
- **Performing a Network Governance Role:** The Municipality must evolve from a “provider of activities and services” to an “orchestrator of opportunities”, using technology to connect supply and demand. The Municipality must involve the third sector, civil society organisations, and the productive sector (not just as sponsors, but as training partners);
- **Introducing New Professional Profiles in Learning Cities:** It is necessary to introduce the figure of the “Learning City Manager” into municipalities, capable of navigating between the different areas of administration and external partners;
- **Thinking by Districts:** Overcoming geographical and administrative boundaries to integrate the real economic and social areas in which citizens actually live into the learning plan;
- **Adopting Simplified Administrative Solutions:** Recourse to Collaboration Pacts and the generalisation of Shared Administration (e.g., Art. 55 of the Third Sector Code, Italian Legislative Decree, 2017). Instead of issuing complex

calls for tenders for every single activity, the Municipality can stipulate long-term “Subsidiarity Pacts” with, for example, networks of associations. This relieves municipal offices of the burden of micro-operational management, leaving them only with the roles of direction and oversight;

- Establishing a “Cross-Cutting Learning Budget”: Experimenting with forms of financial co-design. If the Municipality invests in a public park (Urban Planning and Public works), a portion of the budget should be tied to environmental or sports education activities. Learning must become a “shared” cost item across multiple sectors;
- Rethinking the Objective regarding the Use of Performance Indicators: Municipalities struggle to collect and produce performance data on which to base evidence-based policies and through which to evaluate the results and impact of policies. Alternative solutions with a high level of usability should be identified. It is necessary to encourage cities to move toward leveraging Big Data for predictive programming and to evaluate “how much economic and social value” has been generated;
- Rethinking Objectives related to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Health and Well-being (Holistic Wellness), etc.: Unesco has closely integrated these and other Goals into the Learning Cities strategy. Learning cities carry out activities in this field but do not seem to have integrated strategies and policies in these domains. Ways must be found to encourage Learning Cities to move beyond the school perimeter, bearing in mind that this possibility also depends on size and institutional competencies.

8. Learning City quality certification

Premise

The considerations expressed below reflect exclusively the analysis and opinion of the authors and are based on empirical evidence highlighting the limits of the current recognition system. In particular, the following critical issues are noted:

- Absence of periodic validation and risk of obsolescence: Recognition of Learning City status does not include periodic audit or certification mechanisms to verify its maintenance over time. Consequently, the title is not affected by any administrative discontinuities or changes in local strategies, risking becoming a formal label lacking a real anchor in current policies;
- Gap between formal recognition and service quality: Currently, membership in the network does not constitute an intrinsic guarantee for the citizen. There is no evidence that a city awarded the title offers qualitatively superior lifelong learning strategies compared to non-recognized municipalities, making the Unesco “brand” potentially self-referential and lacking a certified impact on the quality of urban life;
- Heterogeneity and lack of shared standards: There is extreme difficulty in identifying common and measurable parameters among different Learning Cities, both internationally and nationally. This fragmentation prevents the comparability of experiences and the definition of a unique, transparent, and replicable governance model.

Why the “Certification” Model

Currently, membership in the Unesco network is based on self-declaration and qualitative biennial monitoring. To date, this process has run parallel to other efforts aimed at defining a classification framework for City Governments. This framework addresses the processes used primarily by government service providers, including the legislative branch (i.e., city councils), the executive branch (i.e., mayors), and related public service providers, such as education, focusing on their interconnections with other policy areas (like American Productivity & Quality Center - APQC). An ISO/UNI-type certification (or APQC or other frameworks) would change the rules of the game because:

- **Objectivity:** It shifts the evaluation from the “narrative of best practices” to “documentary and performance verification” carried out by an external auditor;
- **Financial Incentives:** Just as gender certification guarantees social security relief or extra points in tender procedures (Procurement Code), a Learning City certification could be the “objective” requirement to obtain reward points in regional, national, or European calls;
- **Administrative Continuity:** An ISO survives changes in local government. If the Municipality is certified, the technical structure is obliged to maintain standards to avoid losing the “seal”, protecting the strategy from electoral cycles;
- **Institutional Recognition:** Certification allows for an escape from self-referentiality, granting the “Learning City” greater political weight in institutional and ministerial settings, where the network often struggles to be recognized as a privileged interlocutor for the allocation of specific funds.

Quality Standards

Certification should not measure “how much culture there is in the city”, but rather the quality of administrative processes and social impact. Evaluation areas similar to the six just indicated could be defined:

- **Integrated Governance:** Existence of a formalised inter-sectoral “Control Room” (not just a delegated councillor);
- **Data Management:** Presence of a learning monitoring system based on Open Data and impact indicators (e.g., decrease in NEETs, elderly participation);
- **Accessibility and Inclusion:** Minimum standards for proximity of learning services (the 15-minute city);
- **Private Sector Involvement:** Number of active training pacts with local businesses.

Risks and Points of Attention

- **The Risk of “Bureaucratization”:** Too rigid a certification could stifle cultural creativity. It should be an “ISO of processes”, not a limit on content;
- **Costs for Small Municipalities:** The State or Region should provide vouchers for the certification of municipalities under 15,000 inhabitants;
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** The system must include scalable criteria. As highlighted by the speakers, the needs of a metropolis like Turin or Palermo are structurally different from those of a small village like Cividale del Friuli or Fermo. The certification must validate the “coherence” between objectives and available resources, not just the absolute volume of activities.

Summary of the Proposal for Unesco UIL

Unesco might not be the certifying body (a role too operational), but rather the Standard-Setting Body. Unesco defines the “Global Certification Scheme”, and national accreditation bodies (such as Accredia) oversee the certification bodies that verify the “UNI-Unesco Standard for Learning Cities”.

Following the model of gender certification (UNI, 2022), the standard is not limited to capturing “what the Municipality does”, but “how it is organised” to ensure that learning is a continuous, inclusive, and measurable process.

Certification Scheme: The 6 Minimum Quality Requirements

- Governance and Control Room (Strategic Area)
 - Requirement: Existence of a formal act (Resolution) establishing an inter-departmental “Strategic Unit for Lifelong Learning”;
 - Quality Standard: The control room must necessarily include representatives from at least three different sectors (e.g., Education, Economic Development, Welfare/Health) and meet at least quarterly. In advanced contexts (Turin/Brescia model), the direction should interface with technical-scientific or academic coordination;
 - Objective: To break administrative “silos” and ensure an integrated vision.
- Strategic Plan and Social Report (Planning Area)
 - Requirement: Adoption of a “Multi-year Territorial Learning Plan” approved by the City Council;
 - Quality Standard: The plan must contain specific objectives for at least three critical targets: NEETs (youth), Workers (upskilling/reskilling), and Seniors (active ageing). A dedicated (or co-financed) budget chapter for network actions must also be indicated;
 - Objective: To ensure the continuity of the strategy beyond electoral cycles.
- Data Management and Impact Indicators (Monitoring Area)
 - Requirement: Implementation of a Monitoring System (Dashboard) based on social and economic impact indicators;
 - Quality Standard: The Municipality must be able to demonstrate annually progress relative to defined Key Performance Indicators-KPIs (e.g., increase in adult population participation, reduction of the digital divide). The use of “Neighborhood Atlases” or GIS systems to monitor the territorial distribution of educational needs is encouraged;
 - Objective: To move from the “narrative of events” to the “measurement of results”.
- Expertise and Internal Training (Human Resources Area)
 - Requirement: Presence of staff with certified skills or specific training in the field of Lifelong Learning;
 - Quality Standard: At least 20% of officials involved in decision-making processes must have attended a training course on territorial development policies. The secondment of specific professional figures (e.g., pedagogical coordinators) dedicated exclusively to the Learning City project is suggested;

- Objective: To resolve the lack of expertise encountered in various Italian realities.
- Stakeholder Involvement and Collaboration Pacts (Network Area)
 - Requirement: Existence of active legal instruments for the involvement of the private sector and the third sector;
 - Quality Standard: Presence of at least one “Collaboration Pact” (Lucca model) or operational protocol with businesses and trade unions providing for workplace learning actions. The activation of public-private partnerships for the management of educational spaces or the funding of territorial scholarships is considered an indicator of excellence;
 - Objective: To bring learning out of public offices and into the productive fabric
- Communication and Active Citizenship
 - Requirement: Institutional communication plan dedicated to the Learning City;
 - Quality Standard: Presence of a dedicated section on the municipal portal, publication of annual reports to the citizenry, and organization of at least one public consultation/feedback event per year;
 - Objective: To make the project perceptible to citizens and stimulate learning demand, ensuring that certification does not remain a purely internal bureaucratic process.

9. Discussion

The reflection should be articulated on four key points:

- *Existing tools vs. New Certification*

The Learning Cities network does not start from a “tabula rasa”. Two consolidated instruments already exist that fulfill functions similar to those required by a certification:

- Biennial Progress Report: It is the mandatory monitoring tool. If a city does not present the report or does not demonstrate progress with respect to the declared long-term vision, it is excluded from the network. Already today, this report integrates many of the required qualitative elements;
- Learning City Award: A special recognition for cities that excel in the implementation of lifelong learning.

It would therefore be preferable not to multiply the instruments, but rather to “refine” and improve the existing Progress Report, elevating it to a standard that allows cities to self-evaluate and plan future progress, instead of introducing an entirely new external tool.

- *Transition from Quantity to Quality*

Until recent times, the priority of the network has been geographical diversity, accepting even reports of not excellent quality in order not to slow down participation. Today the objective is no longer numerical growth, but the raising of quality. In this sense, Unesco recognises that the language of “certification” (ISO model) is coherent with the needs of the contemporary world and can be useful to justify capacity building.

- *The dilemma of Verification and Sovereignty*

This is the most critical point. By statute, international organisations such as Unesco are based on trust towards Member States:

- The principle of recognition: Unesco accepts the data provided by countries (e.g., literacy rates) as it officially recognises the voice of the State;
- The technical obstacle: A certification necessarily implies a third-party verification. This step would create diplomatic tension, as Unesco would find itself having to “doubt” or verify the truthfulness of what is declared by members, an action that goes against the current system of international relations of the organisation.
- *Risks of Bureaucratization and Rigidity*

With respect to the management of cultural heritage, the Learning Cities initiative is considered a “young” process.

- The bureaucratic weight: Formalising a certification system would require the approval of all Member States, triggering a heavy bureaucratic process;
- Flexibility: Unesco fears that an overly rigid certification could take away flexibility from the model, making it difficult to apply to profoundly different realities.

In summary:

We agree with the principles at the base of the proposal (transparency, monitoring, quality), but invites a structural reflection. The suggested path is not that of creating a parallel track, but of transforming the already existing reporting processes into more rigorous qualitative standards, avoiding burdening the network with bureaucratic procedures that could limit its effectiveness and global participation.

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