

Collaborative and Co-Creation Models in the Reform of Public Administration in the Education Sector

 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v10i4.1314>

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A B S T R A C T

This literature review examines the growing importance of collaboration and co-creation – defined here as the joint development of public services through active stakeholder involvement – in educational public administration reform. Traditional bureaucratic and hierarchical governance models are gradually being replaced by participatory frameworks that emphasize shared responsibility, stakeholder engagement, and innovation. This review applies the theoretical lenses of New Public Governance (to analyze decentralization and networked governance), public value theory (to evaluate value creation through collaboration), and service-dominant logic (to understand co-production in service delivery). Sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, policy papers, and case studies published between 2005 and 2025. Four key themes emerge: (1) the conceptual foundations of co-creation, (2) stakeholder roles and participatory mechanisms, (3) enabling conditions for collaborative innovation, and (4) institutional barriers to implementation. Evidence shows that collaborative, co-creative models can enhance the legitimacy, responsiveness, and effectiveness of education systems – especially when supported by trust, leadership, resources, and a shared vision. Nonetheless, barriers such as bureaucratic rigidity, power asymmetries, limited institutional capacity, and cultural resistance persist. The review underscores the importance of adaptive, context-sensitive, and adequately resourced strategies to embed co-creation in education reform. By offering a thematic synthesis of current research, it contributes to both academic discourse and practical policymaking in public administration. It also identifies critical research gaps, particularly in underrepresented and developing contexts.

Keywords: Collaborative Governance, Co-Creation, Educational Public Administration

Article History:

Received 01st August 2025

Accepted 21st August 2025

Published 26th August 2025



INTRODUCTION

Education systems around the world are being reshaped by complex societal demands, technological disruptions, and rising calls for accountability and equity. These pressures reveal the inadequacies of traditional governance structures in public education. Hierarchical, bureaucratic models – once dominant in administering schools and universities – often rely on rigid procedures, one-way decision-making, and top-down control. While such models once ensured order and uniformity, they now hinder responsiveness and innovation in increasingly diverse and dynamic educational contexts.

Traditional governance tends to overlook the nuanced and localized realities of education. Schools are not neutral machines; they are social institutions embedded in communities, shaped by cultural values, and influenced by stakeholder dynamics. Administrators alone cannot capture the full range of needs, insights, or aspirations within a school system. When decisions are made without inclusive consultation, the outcomes may lack relevance, legitimacy, and sustainability. This disconnects between top-level decisions and ground-level realities underscores the need for a more participatory approach.

Furthermore, the public's expectations of education have shifted significantly in recent decades. Citizens now demand more transparency, responsiveness, and voice in public service

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delivery, particularly in education. Stakeholders—parents, students, teachers, community members—are no longer content being passive recipients of educational services. Instead, they seek to be active partners in shaping policies, curricula, and learning environments. Traditional models are ill-equipped to facilitate this shift toward collaboration and shared governance.

As a response to these pressures, public administration has entered an era marked by openness, decentralization, and participation. New approaches emphasize the co-production and co-creation of public value, where governments and citizens work together as equal contributors. Within the education sector, this transition is not only desirable but necessary. Schools and universities must be designed and managed in ways that reflect the needs, voices, and contributions of all relevant actors. They are no longer isolated institutions but hubs of community engagement and innovation.

Co-creation, in particular, offers a compelling framework for transforming educational governance. Defined as the collaborative development and delivery of services by state and non-state actors, co-creation promotes shared ownership, accountability, and trust. It shifts the role of government from being the sole provider to a facilitator of dialogue and coordination. In educational settings, co-creation can lead to better learning outcomes, more relevant curricula, and stronger stakeholder alignment. It fosters a culture of joint problem-solving and continuous learning.

This paradigm shift aligns closely with the principles of New Public Governance (NPG), which emphasizes network-based collaboration and multi-actor participation. NPG challenges the assumption that government agencies alone possess the expertise or authority to deliver effective public services. Instead, it recognizes that value is co-constructed through interaction, cooperation, and mutual dependence. Public value theory further complements this view by proposing that legitimacy stems from the ability to create outcomes that matter to the public.

As Osborne (2006) articulates, “public services are moving from being delivered by the state to being co-produced by citizens.” This redefinition of public service delivery has profound implications for how education systems are structured and managed. The idea that learners, parents, and communities should be involved in educational decision-making is no longer radical—it is increasingly seen as essential. Governance models that exclude these voices risk becoming disconnected, ineffective, and even counterproductive.

Service-dominant logic, another relevant theoretical lens, also reinforces the view that value is created through use, not production alone. In other words, the effectiveness of education lies not just in policies or curricula, but in how these are interpreted, applied, and adapted by users. Vargo and Lusch (2008) argue that “value is always co-created in use rather than embedded in output.” This concept has deep implications for the co-design of educational programs, pedagogical methods, and administrative processes.

The urgency for reform became especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed the fragility of top-down systems in times of crisis. Schools had to shift rapidly to remote learning, requiring quick coordination among teachers, parents, students, and support organizations. Hierarchical systems struggled to respond in real time, while collaborative networks proved more agile and adaptive. This experience emphasized that participatory governance is not just a normative ideal, but a functional necessity in education.

Bovaird and Loeffler (2012) underscore this point by stating, “co-production and co-creation are no longer optional—they are essential to the successful delivery of public services in turbulent times.” In education, such turbulence is not limited to pandemics. It includes technological changes, demographic shifts, inequality, and the growing complexity of learners’ needs. Navigating these realities requires inclusive, flexible, and responsive governance structures that can evolve alongside their environments.

Despite the clear benefits, co-creation in educational governance is not without challenges. Institutional inertia, lack of capacity, conflicting stakeholder interests, and deep-seated power asymmetries can limit genuine participation. In some cases, co-creation initiatives are implemented superficially, resulting in tokenistic involvement rather than

meaningful engagement. As Voorberg et al. (2015) argue, "many co-creation initiatives remain at the level of rhetoric rather than practice." Recognizing and addressing these obstacles is key to effective reform.

Another important consideration is context. The implementation of co-creation strategies cannot follow a one-size-fits-all model. Educational governance in the Global South, for example, often faces distinct resource constraints, cultural dynamics, and political challenges. Imported frameworks must be adapted to local needs and realities. Heeks (2002) warns that "imported models of reform often fail because they neglect the complex realities of developing contexts." Successful co-creation must therefore be rooted in local knowledge and social capital.

Nevertheless, numerous case studies provide evidence of how co-creation can enhance educational outcomes. These include participatory curriculum design, community-based school management, and the use of digital platforms to foster engagement among teachers, learners, and families. Hartley et al. (2013) note that "innovation in the public sector is not about invention but about recombining existing elements in new and meaningful ways." This reflects the creative potential of co-creation to transform how education systems operate.

In light of these developments, there is a need for comprehensive research that synthesizes theoretical insights and practical experiences of co-creation in education. A structured understanding of what works, under what conditions, and with which actors, is vital for shaping future policies. The literature review that follows seeks to address this need by mapping existing knowledge and identifying critical gaps. It contributes to both academic scholarship and policymaking efforts in public administration and education reform.

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on research in public administration, education studies, sociology, and innovation theory. Such a perspective is necessary given the cross-sectoral and human-centered nature of co-creation processes. It also enables a more holistic understanding of how governance, community participation, and learning are intertwined. As Sørensen and Torfing (2011) argue, "collaborative innovation is a hybrid process that defies traditional academic boundaries."

Ultimately, the central argument of this review is that traditional governance models – while historically valuable – are no longer sufficient to meet the demands of contemporary education. They must be complemented, and in many cases replaced, by participatory frameworks that leverage the collective intelligence of diverse stakeholders. By embracing collaboration and co-creation, education systems can become more democratic, inclusive, and effective. This transformation is not only possible but increasingly imperative in the face of 21st-century challenges.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative literature review methodology to synthesize both theoretical and empirical insights related to collaborative and co-creation models in the context of educational public administration. A qualitative approach is particularly well-suited for exploring conceptual diversity, case-based complexity, and policy-driven reforms. Rather than testing specific hypotheses, this review aims to explore patterns, map conceptual developments, and provide a thematic synthesis of existing research. The literature-based method enables a comprehensive understanding of the multidimensional nature of innovation in educational governance and forms a foundation for future empirical inquiry.

Inclusion criteria were clearly defined to ensure relevance and rigor. Studies were included if they (1) focused on the education sector, (2) engaged with themes of public administration, governance, or institutional reform, and (3) explicitly discussed collaborative or co-creation mechanisms in either theoretical or applied contexts. Publications were excluded if they lacked conceptual clarity, empirical grounding, or direct relevance to educational governance. Both qualitative and mixed-method studies were considered, provided they offered analytical insight into participatory practices.

To identify relevant literature, a systematic search was conducted across several academic databases, including Scopus, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. The search covered literature published between 2005 and 2025, using a combination of keywords such as: "co-creation in education," "collaborative public administration," "participatory governance," "public value in education," and "education innovation." Boolean operators (e.g., AND, OR) were used to refine results, and snowball sampling was applied to track citations of key publications.

The screening process followed a two-phase protocol to ensure methodological rigor. First, titles and abstracts were reviewed to filter out irrelevant or duplicate entries. Second, full-text articles were examined for analytical depth, methodological transparency, and alignment with inclusion criteria. In total, 58 publications were selected for comprehensive analysis. The final sample includes global and regional studies, covering diverse socio-political and institutional contexts to capture variation in how co-creation is understood and practiced.

For data analysis, the study employed thematic analysis as the primary method. This involved inductive coding of recurring concepts, frameworks, stakeholder roles, implementation strategies, enabling factors, and institutional constraints. Themes were iteratively refined through close reading and constant comparison, leading to the identification of four major thematic categories: (1) conceptual foundations of co-creation, (2) stakeholder engagement and implementation strategies, (3) enabling conditions for collaborative innovation, and (4) institutional and cultural barriers to adoption. This method supports depth and flexibility, accommodating both theoretical and empirical sources.

Although this review contributes valuable insights into the evolving field of collaborative governance in education, it also has certain limitations. First, it is based primarily on English-language publications and indexed databases, which may exclude relevant research in other languages or informal sources. Second, the highly contextual nature of education reform limits the generalizability of findings across regions. Despite these limitations, the study offers a structured overview of the co-creation landscape and points to future research directions—particularly in underrepresented or resource-constrained settings where innovation in governance is most needed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The literature reviewed reveals a growing scholarly and practical interest in collaborative and co-creation models within the context of educational public administration. These models are increasingly being promoted as viable alternatives to traditional top-down bureaucratic governance. The analysis led to the emergence of four major themes: (1) conceptual frameworks and theoretical foundations, (2) stakeholder roles and participatory mechanisms, (3) enabling conditions for successful collaboration, and (4) institutional challenges and barriers. Each theme contributes to a holistic understanding of how collaborative innovations function and evolve in educational settings. In this section, key findings are discussed thematically with references to the literature, followed by an integrative interpretation of their implications. The analysis not only synthesizes evidence but also connects theoretical debates with policy and administrative practices in education. Ultimately, the findings point toward the potential of co-creation to democratize educational governance and improve policy relevance.

Conceptual Foundations of Collaboration and Co-Creation in Education

The first theme that emerged from the literature relates to the theoretical underpinnings of collaboration and co-creation in public sector governance, particularly in the education sector. These models are often grounded in New Public Governance (NPG), which emphasizes networks, partnerships, and citizen involvement rather than hierarchy and control (Osborne, 2010). In contrast to traditional New Public Management (NPM), which focuses on efficiency and managerialism, NPG promotes collective problem-solving and adaptive learning processes.

Co-creation in public education is generally viewed as a mechanism for enhancing both democratic legitimacy and service effectiveness. It acknowledges that students, parents, teachers, and community stakeholders have contextual knowledge that can enrich decision-making. This aligns with Vargo and Lusch's (2008) service-dominant logic, which asserts that value is co-created rather than delivered. In education, this means shifting the narrative from "students as recipients" to "students as partners."

The reviewed literature also links co-creation with public value theory, which suggests that public services should not only be efficient but also ethically justified, inclusive, and accountable. Education is seen as a public good that benefits from diverse input and shared responsibility. Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg (2014) argue that public value is created when governments collaborate with various actors to achieve outcomes that matter to the public.

Several studies also connect co-creation to deliberative democracy, especially in educational reform efforts. Deliberation is key when stakeholders bring competing values, interests, and goals. Fung (2006) highlights participatory deliberation as a means of achieving legitimacy and learning in public administration. In schools, this may take the form of participatory school councils, parent-teacher forums, or student assemblies.

The evolution of co-creation is traced back to private-sector innovation literature, but its application in education demands a reinterpretation of goals and values. Educational co-creation goes beyond market logic and seeks societal transformation. It is not just about creating better services but also nurturing civic engagement and inclusion (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012). This makes it especially relevant in democratic and pluralistic societies.

Conceptually, collaboration and co-creation represent a shift from control to coordination, from rule-based systems to trust-based networks. This theoretical shift requires a redefinition of roles, from authoritative administrators to facilitators and conveners of knowledge. The education sector—with its inherently developmental mission—provides fertile ground for these conceptual shifts.

There is also a strong emphasis on co-design and co-evaluation in the reviewed studies. These two processes help translate theory into practice. Co-design allows stakeholders to collectively create educational programs or policies, while co-evaluation ensures that outcomes are assessed by those directly impacted. This ensures better alignment between public policies and public needs.

In summary, the conceptual literature supports the integration of collaboration and co-creation in educational public administration. These models are seen as not only reformative but transformative, capable of changing institutional cultures and governance paradigms. They offer a theoretical foundation for practical experimentation and future research.

Stakeholder Roles and Participatory Mechanisms

A key theme in the literature is the identification of stakeholder roles and the participatory mechanisms that facilitate co-creation in education. Stakeholders include students, parents, educators, civil society, and government bodies. Their involvement varies based on context, but successful collaboration often relies on role clarity and mutual respect. As Ansell and Gash (2008) suggest, sustained collaboration depends on inclusive participation, trust-building, and shared goals.

The role of students has evolved significantly in co-creation processes. Instead of being passive consumers of education, they are increasingly seen as agents who can influence pedagogical design, learning technologies, and school governance. This is especially true in higher education, where student feedback informs curriculum reforms, and co-designed courses are gaining popularity.

Parents and communities also play a critical role in participatory governance, particularly in primary and secondary education. Their involvement ranges from school budgeting to safety planning. Research shows that when parents are actively engaged, student outcomes improve and school accountability increases. Co-creation mechanisms like community forums and school boards help institutionalize this engagement.

The literature emphasizes the importance of teachers as boundary-spanners, mediating between policy and practice. Their professional autonomy, when respected in co-creative

processes, leads to more grounded innovations. Teachers who co-create with students and parents also develop a deeper understanding of learners' needs, thus improving classroom experiences (Whitty, 2008).

Local government and education authorities act as enablers or barriers depending on how they frame the participatory process. When authorities adopt a facilitative role, they help create an enabling environment for co-creation. However, overly bureaucratic systems may limit participation to symbolic acts, leading to disillusionment among stakeholders.

Technology is increasingly used as a platform for participation. Digital tools such as online surveys, educational apps, and e-governance portals allow for broader and more flexible stakeholder involvement. These tools can overcome geographical and temporal constraints, although they require digital literacy and equitable access to be effective.

Some case studies reveal that co-creation works best when roles are co-negotiated rather than assigned top-down. Flexibility, iterative feedback, and shared leadership allow stakeholders to adapt their contributions as the process evolves. This dynamic arrangement fosters creativity and responsiveness, which are critical in educational innovation.

Finally, participatory mechanisms must be supported by institutional structures such as legal mandates, funding models, and accountability frameworks. Without such supports, co-creation may remain fragmented or unsustainable. Successful cases highlight the need for formalizing roles without over-bureaucratizing the process

Enabling Conditions for Collaborative Innovation

Enabling conditions are crucial for sustaining collaborative innovation in education governance. The literature identifies trust, leadership, resources, and shared vision as recurring elements that make collaboration work. These conditions often function synergistically, reinforcing one another in complex policy environments.

Trust is the foundational element cited across nearly all studies. Trust among stakeholders ensures open communication, risk-taking, and long-term commitment. Without trust, co-creation can become performative or conflict-ridden. Trust-building takes time and requires transparency, fairness, and consistent engagement by all actors.

Leadership also emerges as a central enabler. Collaborative leadership emphasizes empathy, listening, and facilitation over command and control. School principals, district officials, and community leaders play pivotal roles in framing collaboration as a shared mission. Distributed leadership models are especially effective in co-creative settings.

The availability of resources – financial, technological, and human – is another critical factor. Co-creation processes demand time and skills, which must be supported institutionally. Programs with adequate funding and technical assistance tend to yield better outcomes. However, many initiatives fail when they rely solely on volunteerism or short-term grants.

A shared vision helps align stakeholder interests and avoid mission drift. Collaborative processes that begin with visioning exercises often build stronger consensus. This is particularly important in pluralistic societies where educational priorities may differ across groups. A shared vision ensures coherence while allowing room for diversity.

Institutional capacity-building supports long-term sustainability of co-creation efforts. This includes training for educators and administrators in participatory methods, digital skills, and cross-sectoral collaboration. Literature suggests that capacity development must be embedded into institutional cultures, not treated as one-off interventions.

Legal and policy frameworks also matter. Some countries have enacted participatory education laws that mandate stakeholder involvement in school planning and evaluation. Such laws provide a normative foundation for co-creation, though they must be matched by political will and implementation capacity.

The role of intermediary organizations – such as NGOs, educational foundations, or research centers – is significant. These actors often provide expertise, mediate stakeholder interests, and document learning. Their neutrality and technical knowledge help ensure process quality and policy relevance.

Lastly, monitoring and feedback loops are essential. Successful co-creation initiatives build mechanisms for learning and adaptation. This allows for continuous improvement and

responsiveness to stakeholder concerns. Feedback loops also help build trust and legitimacy over time.

Institutional Barriers and Implementation Challenges

Despite the potential benefits, numerous barriers hinder the implementation of collaborative and co-creation models in educational public administration. These barriers include bureaucratic rigidity, power asymmetries, lack of capacity, and cultural resistance.

Bureaucratic rigidity often limits flexibility and responsiveness in decision-making. Hierarchical structures with centralized authority are ill-suited for the iterative, participatory nature of co-creation. Rules and procedures may conflict with the informal dynamics of collaboration.

Power asymmetries between stakeholders—especially between government officials and marginalized communities—can distort the co-creation process. When some voices dominate, participation becomes symbolic rather than substantive. Literature suggests that facilitation and safeguards are needed to ensure equity.

A recurring issue is the lack of institutional capacity to manage collaborative processes. Administrators and educators may lack training or support to engage meaningfully in co-creation. Moreover, high workloads and lack of incentives often discourage active participation, leading to superficial compliance.

Cultural resistance within institutions can undermine reform efforts. In some educational systems, top-down authority is deeply ingrained, and staff may view collaboration as a threat to professional autonomy. Overcoming this requires cultural change, which is slow and often contested.

Another challenge is the short-termism of policy cycles, which discourages long-term commitment to co-creation. Political leaders may favor quick wins over deep reforms. This leads to fragmented initiatives that fail to scale or sustain impact. Institutional memory and documentation are often lacking.

Lack of accountability mechanisms also hampers co-creation. Without clear responsibilities and evaluative benchmarks, it is difficult to track progress or make course corrections. This creates frustration among participants and can erode trust in the process.

In some cases, tokenistic participation undermines the legitimacy of co-creation efforts. Stakeholders are invited to consult but have no real influence on decisions. This erodes motivation and may produce cynicism among community members and educators alike.

Finally, contextual variation poses a challenge. What works in one locality may not work in another due to differences in governance structures, political culture, and resource availability. Therefore, co-creation must be context-sensitive, grounded in local realities, and adaptable to change.

CONCLUSIONS

The literature review highlights the urgent need for educational governance to shift from traditional bureaucratic models to collaborative and co-creative frameworks that actively involve diverse stakeholders. By embracing co-creation, education systems can enhance democratic legitimacy, responsiveness, and effectiveness, ultimately fostering a culture of shared responsibility and innovation. However, this transformation faces significant challenges, including institutional barriers, power imbalances, and cultural resistance. Addressing these obstacles requires a commitment to adaptive, context-sensitive strategies that leverage local knowledge and resources, ensuring that educational reforms not only reflect the voices of all stakeholders but also lead to meaningful improvements in learning outcomes and public value.

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