



POLICY BRIEF

More than a Meeting

Building effective teacher communities of practice in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Teachers across Bosnia and Herzegovina engage in communities of practice (CoPs), but practical barriers and differing needs by experience level shape how people benefit. This research highlights trends in participation, perceived impact, and what is needed for sustainable and inclusive CoPs.

KEY FINDINGS

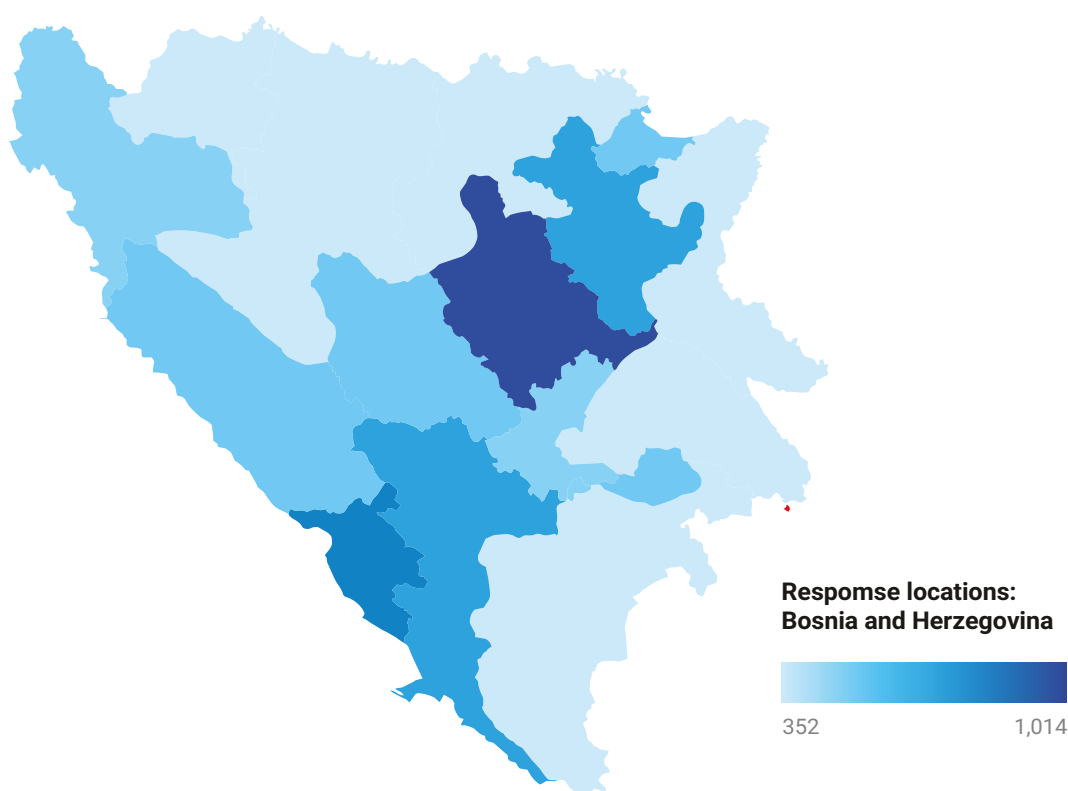
- **Participation in CoPs is developed but fragmented.** Most teachers engage in School Aktivs to share resources and teaching strategies, but frequency, depth of engagement and perceived benefits vary by subject taught and experience level.
- **Teaching experience is the strongest predictor of participation,** more so than age, gender or school type. Early-career teachers report the lowest engagement level.
- **Barriers are practical, not motivational.** Time constraints and a lack of knowledge about how to join CoPs are the most cited barriers, and this is most acute among vocational and secondary teachers.
- **Engagement leads to impact.** Teachers participating in multiple CoPs are significantly more likely to report improvements in professional development, collaboration and teaching skills.

Context

Communities of practice (CoPs) are groups of individuals, in this case educators, who come together due to common interests and motivations to learn and share among one another. In the Western Balkans, significant efforts have been made to create and strengthen CoPs among teachers and education professionals, to enhance education and skills development.

This research is part of a regional partnership between UNICEF Country Offices in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, and UNICEF Innocenti. The goal is to generate actionable evidence which can strengthen the sustainability and impact of CoP-related interventions in the Western Balkans.

This brief focuses on Bosnia and Herzegovina. UNICEF Bosnia and Herzegovina has encouraged CoP proliferation via ready-to-use digital solutions like Tobii Dynavox for Boardmaker licenced users, and support platforms such as Viber and Facebook groups. New methodologies for horizontal, structured knowledge exchanges and peer support, known as Intervision, have been piloted in 10 out of 12 administrative units. CoP projects have also been implemented outside of education systems and have seen positive support throughout all 12 administrative units of Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Note: This map does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory in the delimitation.

This research brief offers insight into the dynamics of teacher engagement in CoPs in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It summarizes key findings from a self-administered online survey of teachers and educators conducted across Bosnia and Herzegovina between December 2024 and April 2025, and from qualitative interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders, including teachers. The survey relied on self-reported data and was disseminated through Ministries of Education and UNICEF-supported networks. The survey explored habits of participation in CoPs, their perceived impact, and barriers to engagement. Findings are intended to inform policy and programming that support inclusive, relevant and sustainable professional learning communities.

- Of 2,551 survey respondents, 2,023 were female (79 per cent) and 522 (20 per cent) were male. 6 respondents identified as 'other'.
- 224 respondents were aged under 30, 713 aged 31–40, 1,091 aged 41–50 and 1,480 aged 50–65. The average age of respondents was 43.
- 407 respondents (16 per cent) reported 0–4 years of experience, 406 (16 per cent) 5–9 years, 779 (41 per cent) 10–19 years, 750 (29 per cent) 20–29 years and 209 (8 per cent) over 30 years of experience.

How do teachers engage with communities of practice?

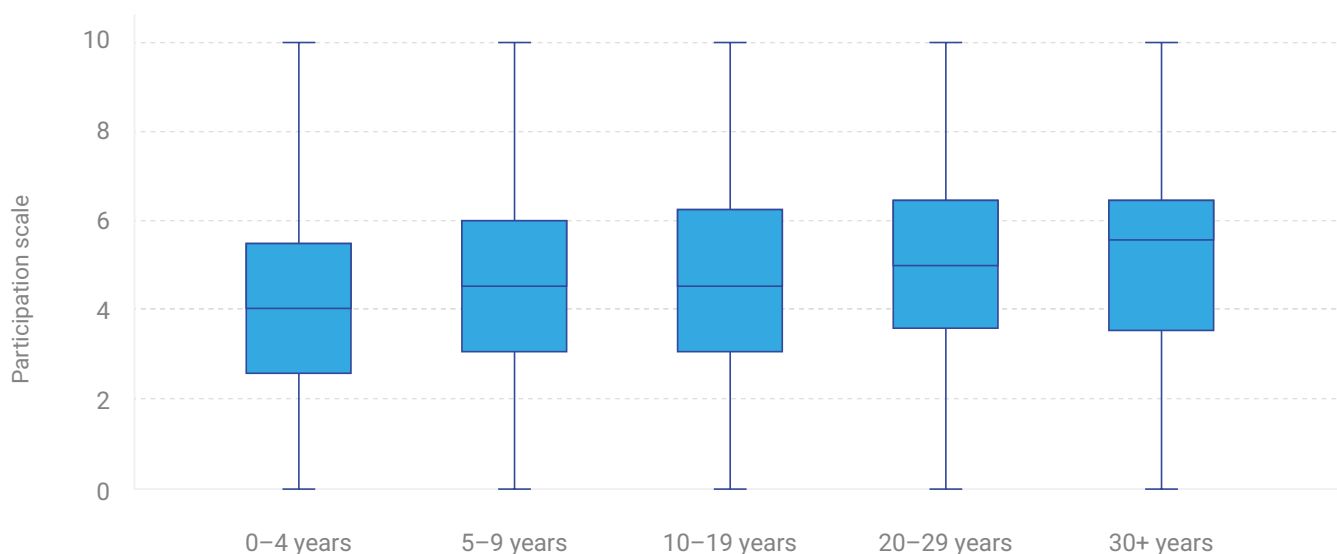
Respondents were asked how often they engage with the following on a weekly or monthly basis:

- 36 per cent report sharing lesson plans, resources or activities with other teachers.
- 34 per cent report reading lesson plans, resources or activities shared by other teachers in teacher groups.
- 26 per cent report discussing teaching strategies with other teachers or education professionals.
- 25 per cent report joining online groups or forums where teachers exchange ideas and materials.
- 22 per cent report participating in meetings or events focused on improving or innovating teaching practices.

Figure 1. CoP participation scale of primary teachers by grades



Figure 2. Participation scale by teaching experience



Responses on engagement habits and frequency were used to calculate a teacher participation scale from 0 to 10, acting as a proxy for depth of CoP engagement. The average teacher engagement scale in Bosnia and Herzegovina was 4.6, suggesting low to moderate levels of CoP engagement. Compared to other countries in the region, Bosnia and Herzegovina scores comparatively lower (Montenegro 5.3, North Macedonia 5.24, Serbia 5.6). Analysis shows that there is a significant difference in scores according to teaching experience, ranging from 4.13 for those with 0–4 years of experience to 5.18 for those with over 30 years of experience. Analysis also showed that there was no statistically significant

difference between primary and secondary school teachers. **This analysis reveals that as teachers gain experience, their engagement in CoPs grows.**

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, teaching experience is the strongest predictor of CoP participation. A regression model found that all experience categories from 5+ years show significant positive associations with CoP participation. **The strongest relationship was among those respondents with 20–29 years of experience.** This analysis shows that as teaching experience increases, so does the likelihood of deeper and more frequent engagement with CoPs. **Age did not show a significant relationship with participation, and findings suggest that practical classroom-based experience is a more important driver of professional collaboration than demographic factors such as age.**

How do teachers engage with communities of practice?

Teachers in Bosnia and Herzegovina primarily engage with CoPs for practical content, but participation is fragmented, and some groups of teachers are much more engaged than other peers. Participation is highest in School Aktivs (83 per cent reporting attendance), with other modalities such as online platforms seeing significantly lower engagement (42 per cent report attendance). Participation in subject-specific CoPs, particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), is more common, with 67 per cent of STEM teachers participating in multiple CoPs.

“We work ... to make learning healthier, more joyful and lasting in terms of memory retention for children. We also focus on networking schools within the canton, state or region. We practice classroom-based learning, local community learning, participative decision-making, strategic school development approaches and inclusion of all stakeholders important to the school – especially the local community, parents and students, along with the administration and teachers.”

CoP leader

Bosnia and Herzegovina

School Aktivs are seen as the most accessible CoP format (by 71 per cent of respondents), but perceptions of their effectiveness is mixed, with only 54 per cent considering them effective. Other CoP models receive even lower ratings for effectiveness. For instance, teacher associations are rated as effective by only 27 per cent of preschool teachers and 10 per cent of schoolteachers. Preferred participation models are hybrid (50 per cent) or in-person (46 per cent), with minimal interest for online-only formats (3 per cent). **These findings point to a clear, long-term need for structured, practical and accessible CoP engagement opportunities that reflect teachers' preferences and professional needs.**

- **Resource-sharing leads participation:** Engagement is primarily shaped by sharing and accessing practical classroom resources. Among respondents, 80 per cent engage with CoPs to improve their teaching skills through strategies such as accessing lesson plans (62 per cent), sharing curricular resources (39 per cent), or seeking general pedagogical skill development (31 per cent). Engagement more explicitly oriented to teacher professional development (TPD) is less frequent, with only 14 per cent engaging in self-reflective practices and 10 per cent participating specifically for professional growth opportunities.
- **School Aktivs are the most common form of CoP engagement,** with 83 per cent reporting participation. However, only 28 per cent of respondents rely exclusively on Aktivs, and there is a strong appetite for other CoP formats including regional and country-level workshops (supported by 41 and 39 per cent of respondents respectively).
- **Engagement varies by subject area:** STEM and information and communication technology (ICT) teachers are more likely to participate in multiple CoPs and subject-specific groups, while participation among pre-primary and vocational teachers is more limited. However, this may also point to the variety in opportunities available for different subjects and teachers working at different levels, demonstrating unequal opportunities across groups.
- **Participation frequency and CoP membership are associated with positive outcomes:** Each additional CoP participated in is associated with odds of reporting a positive impact on professional development ($\beta = 0.23$, $p = 0.045$).
- **Teaching background shapes perceptions of value:** Across the entire sample, 54 per cent of respondents consider School Aktivs effective for TPD, compared with 41 per cent for online platforms. Preschool teachers find Aktivs more effective than primary-level teachers (27 versus 10 per cent), despite low perceived effectiveness overall.

What motivates CoP participation?

Teachers are motivated to join CoPs to enhance teaching, and the most frequently cited motivations are to enhance teaching skills (80 per cent) and accessing new teaching materials and resources (62 per cent). **Practical benefits dominate, but peer engagement also plays a role**: 50 per cent of respondents participate to collaborate with colleagues, and 87 per cent seek feedback or new perspectives. While motivations such as self-reflection or goal-setting are less common (14 per cent), analysis shows **motivations differ by experience level and professional context**. Early-career teachers are more likely to seek pedagogical guidance and confidence-building, and 37 per cent of teachers with 0–4 years of experience seek pedagogical resources compared with 28 per cent of those with over 30 years of experience.

How do different groups experience CoPs?

Experience level shapes how teachers perceive the value of CoPs. Novice educators report improvements in areas such as classroom management and confidence. In contrast, more experienced teachers (10+ years) are less likely to cite gains in classroom management or confidence, but are more likely to value CoPs for peer collaboration and access to new teaching materials. This suggests both the purpose of CoP participation and perceived value of membership evolves over the course of a teacher's career.

Overall, teachers widely recognize the value of CoPs. Most respondents (78 per cent) believe participation improves teaching, with pre-primary teachers reporting higher agreement (82 per cent) and vocational educators reporting slightly lower (75 per cent). Even among those with no or little CoP engagement, 68 per cent agree CoPs positively contribute to professional growth, underscoring that barriers to participation stem from practical limitations rather than a lack of perceived value.

What are the key barriers to engagement?

Time constraints and limited awareness of how to join CoPs are the main barriers preventing wider CoP participation. Nearly half of respondents (48 per cent) report experiencing barriers, with the most common being a lack of time or excessive workload (cited by 80 per cent of those facing challenges). This is most acute among secondary/gymnasium teachers (85 per cent). A significant share of teachers not engaged in CoPs do not know how or where to join teacher groups (27 per cent), a figure that rises for gymnasium (31 per cent) and vocational education and training (VET) (32 per cent) teachers.

“Many of our activities aren’t formally recognized, and ... participants receive no advancement of benefits for their involvement, especially in some cantons ... [where] you must request Ministry [of Education] approval for a conference to possibly be recognized as professional development, which is [difficult] if we don’t have a direct agreement with the Ministry.”

CoP leader

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Barriers to engagement are therefore structural, not attitudinal. Most notably, 68 per cent of respondents with no or little CoP participation still believe CoPs positively impact TPD, and there is support among respondents to formally integrate CoP membership with structured professional development (supported by 37 per cent of respondents). **Limited participation is not due to a lack of interest or limited belief in the value of CoPs, but rather practical and structural constraints which inhibit access.**

How can we encourage engagement?

CoPs offer a practical and scalable model for TPD in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There is an immediate opportunity to expand CoP participation by institutionalizing CoPs within the education system. Authorities should lead by adopting targeted, accessible approaches that meet diverse educator needs and remove participation barriers, while working closely with schools and drawing on UNICEF’s technical and coordination expertise.



1. Strengthen awareness and access pathways. Clear, accessible guidance is essential for scaling participation. A total of 27 per cent of teachers who face barriers are unaware of how or where to join a CoP, rising to 34 per cent among those who show no or little CoP participation. Targeted outreach, particularly for vocational and secondary school educators who face the largest access gaps, is critical. Integrating CoP information into pre- and in-service training will help ensure early-career teachers are equipped to participate from the start.



2. Institutionalize CoPs within TPD frameworks. Aligning CoPs with formal TPD systems will enhance uptake, credibility and impact. A total of 37 per cent of respondents support integrating CoP participation into TPD, and linking participation with certification or promotion pathways can incentivize sustained engagement, collaboration and peer-learning.



3. Tailor support to career stage. CoPs should respond to teachers' evolving needs while leveraging their experience. Early-career teachers are more likely to seek pedagogical support, confidence-building and classroom management strategies, while more experienced educators report collaboration in shared resources. Structured mentorship models, including pairing early-career with experienced teachers, can foster cross-generational learning and strengthen the relevance of CoPs across career stages.



4. Expand and diversify participation formats. Flexible modalities are key to broader engagement. Half of respondents prefer hybrid formats, while only 3 per cent favour online-only participation. Interest in regional (41 per cent) and Bosnia and Herzegovina-wide (39 per cent) workshops reflect a strong demand for cross-institutional learning opportunities.



5. Allocate dedicated time and resources for participation. Lack of time and high workloads, especially among secondary, gymnasium and vocational teachers, are the most cited barriers (80 per cent). Protecting time for CoP engagement, especially for collaboration and facilitator preparation, is essential to reducing pressure and enabling meaningful participation.

Acknowledgements

This research brief was prepared by Cedomir Vuckovic under the supervision and guidance of Thomas Dreesen, Education Manager, UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence - Innocenti, and Sara Saljić, UNICEF Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The authors acknowledge invaluable inputs throughout the research by colleagues from UNICEF Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ivana Zečević, Sanja Kabil and Amila Madžak), and UNICEF Innocenti (Svetlana Poleschuk). Finally, we particularly acknowledge the research efforts of Joaquín Cárceles Martínez-Lozano, UNICEF Innocenti.

Copy editing: Accuracy Matters

Layout: Afternorth

Cover photo: © UNICEF/UNI611080/Djemidzic

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Published by

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Suggested citation

UVuckovic, C., *More than a Meeting: Building effective teacher communities of practice in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, UNICEF Innocenti, Florence, September 2026.

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