



POLICY BRIEF

More than a Meeting

Building effective teacher communities of practice in North Macedonia

Teachers across North Macedonia engage in communities of practice (CoPs) with strong interest in resource sharing and professional development. But participation varies by subject taught and teaching level, with structural barriers remaining as key participation constraints. Mixed-methods research involving national teacher surveys, and interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders including the Ministry of Education and Science and CoP leaders, highlights how teachers engage with CoPs, what challenges they face, and how CoPs can be better integrated in sustained professional development.

KEY FINDINGS

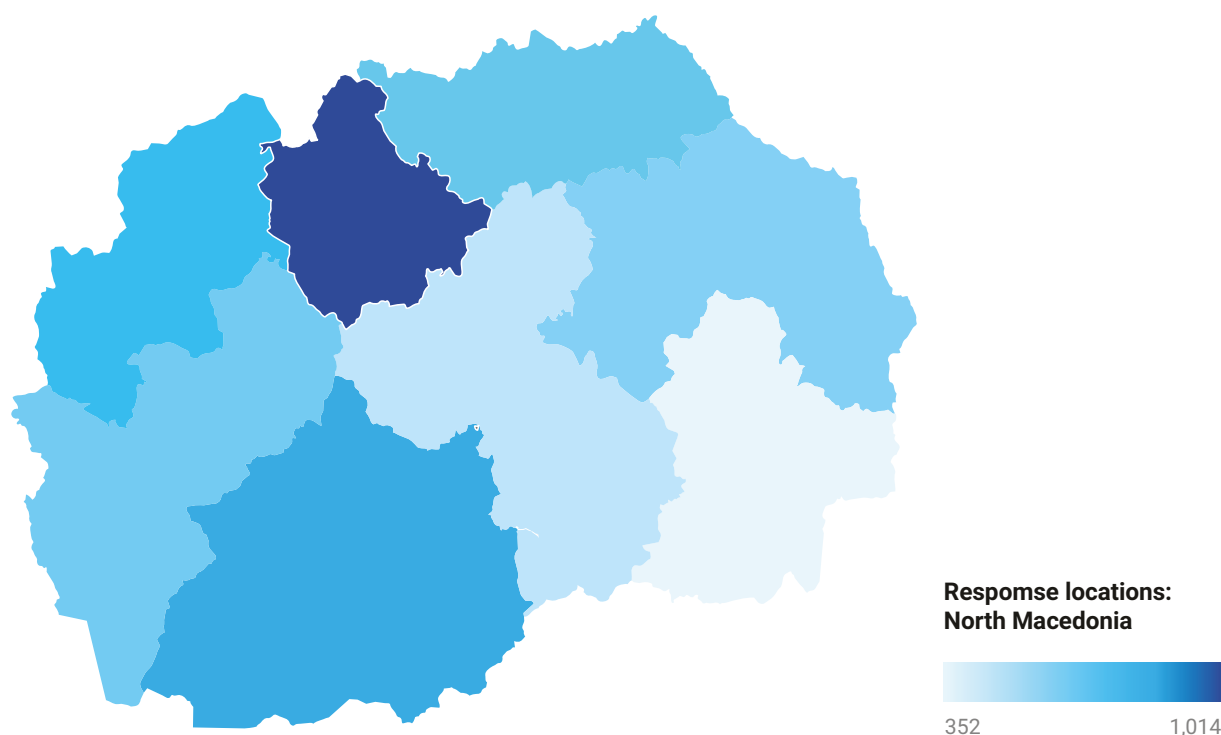
- CoPs are widely valued, and practical access dominates participation. Teachers primarily engage to improve teaching and access new materials, but 42 per cent of low-engagement teachers do not know how to join a CoP.
- Teaching level shapes engagement. Participation varies most by teaching level and subject. Kindergarten teachers and those in science and social science are most engaged. Age and experience hold little explanatory power.
- Structural barriers outweigh attitudinal ones, and 59 per cent of those experiencing barriers cited time and workload. Only 7 per cent cite a lack of perceived value.
- Teachers desire more ambitious CoP formats. Although 74 per cent participate in School Aktivs, only 31 per cent join subject-specific CoPs, and 42 per cent seek regional collaboration.

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 North Macedonia. UNICEF North Macedonia has supported CoPs in preschool education as part of a social and emotional learning programme by supporting preschool teachers to establish CoPs in their schools. With the establishment of the national online learning platform EDUINO, the EDUINO Ambassadors initiative was supported by UNICEF to acknowledge and support the most dedicated teachers in developing online educational content and materials.



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 teacher engagement in CoPs in North Macedonia. It summarizes key findings from a self-administered survey of teachers in North Macedonia between December 2024 and April 2025, and interviews and focus groups conducted with

key stakeholders. Surveys were disseminated through The Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Social Policy Demographics and Youth, and UNICEF networks, and explored participation habits and barriers, and perceived CoP impact. Findings are intended to inform policy and programming that support inclusive, relevant and sustainable professional learning communities. Quantitative analysis combined descriptive, bivariate and multivariate analyses to identify participation patterns, engagement predictors, and outcomes. Qualitative thematic analysis explored common themes, barriers and dynamics. Although the survey relied on self-reported data and a non-random sample, respondent profiles showed broad distribution of engagement levels, mitigating the risk of overrepresentation of engaged teachers.

- Of 4,075 survey respondents, 786 (19 per cent) were male and 3,280 (81 per cent) were female. Five respondents identified as 'other'.
- 6 per cent of respondents were aged 20–30, 28 per cent aged 31–40, 40 per cent aged 41–50 and 25 per cent aged 50–65. The average age of respondents was 44.4 years.
- 12 per cent of respondents taught at kindergarten level, 63 per cent at primary, 11 per cent at secondary and 18 per cent at vocational levels.
- In terms of experience, 16 per cent of respondents reported 0–4 years of teaching experience, 19 per cent 5–9 years, 36 per cent 10–19 years, 20 per cent 20–29 years and 9 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 weekly or monthly:

- 47 per cent report sharing lesson plans, resources or activities with other teachers.
- 42 per cent report reading lesson plans, resources or activities shared by other teachers in teacher groups.
- 33 per cent report discussing teaching strategies with other teachers or education professionals.

- 24 per cent report participating in meetings or events focused on improving or innovating teaching practices.
- 24 per cent report joining online groups or forums where teachers exchange ideas and materials.

Figure 1. CoP engagement

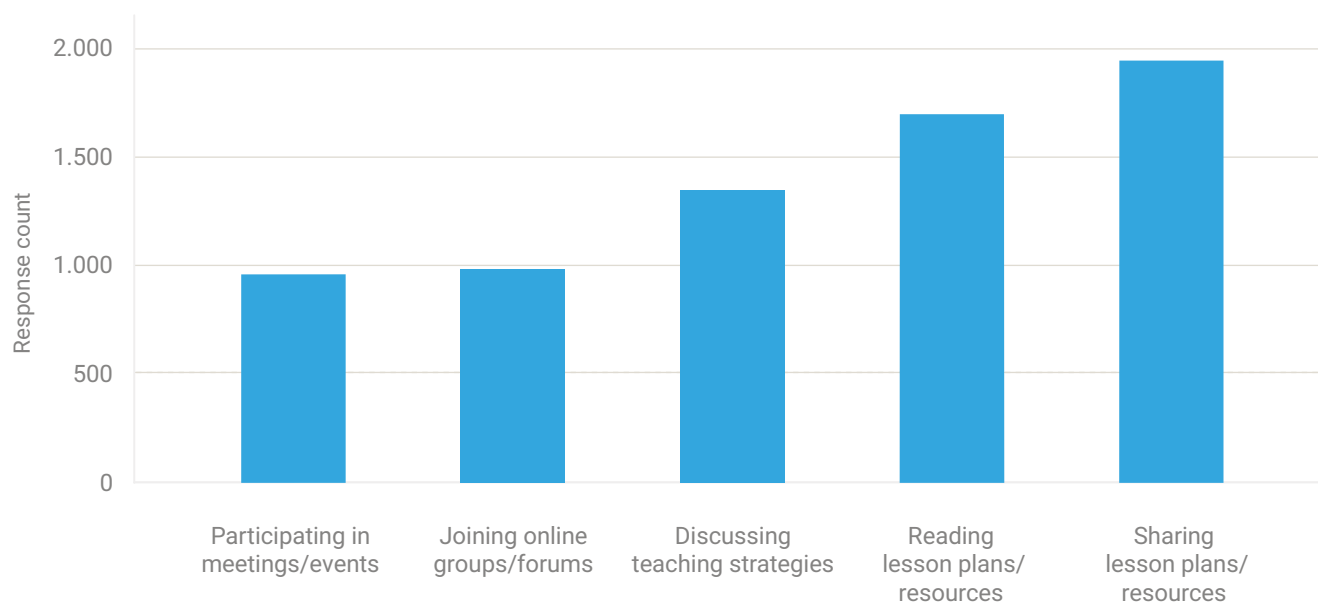
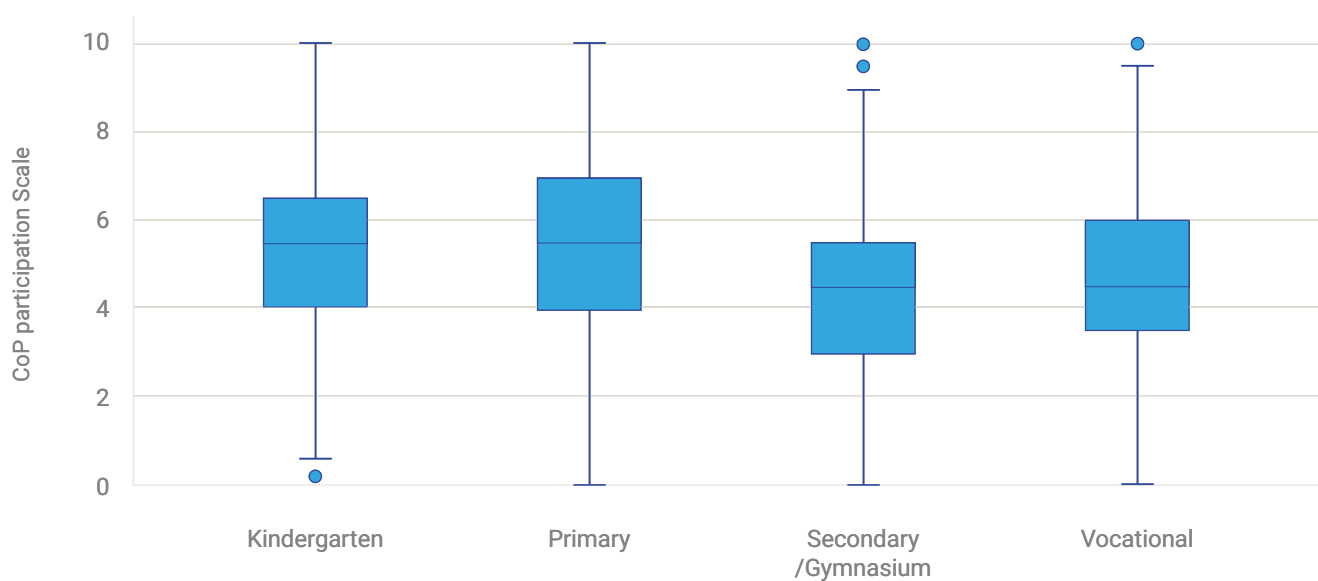


Figure 2. CoP participation scale by teaching level



Responses on the above engagement habits and frequency were used to calculate a teacher engagement scale from 0 to 10. The average teacher engagement scale in North Macedonia was 5.3, suggesting moderate levels of CoP engagement. Analysis shows that there is a significant difference in scores according to teaching level and subject taught. Teachers of younger students engage more broadly in CoPs, and those working in kindergartens scored 5.3, while those in secondary or gymnasium schools score 4.4. Participation is deeper among teachers who indicated subject specializations in mathematics (6.0), art (6.0), science (5.9) and social science (5.9), than those in languages (5.5) or vocational subjects (4.8). Other predictors such as teaching experience held lower explanatory power on engagement scores.

Among respondents in North Macedonia, **teaching level is the strongest predictor of CoP participation**. Analysis showed that while subject taught held a statistically significant effect on CoP participation, teaching level explained the most unique variance. Other social characteristics such as gender, age and years of teaching experience had no substantial impact on CoP participation. This analysis shows that in North Macedonia, **what and at which level a teacher teaches matters** more than other sociodemographic characteristics when it comes to CoP engagement.

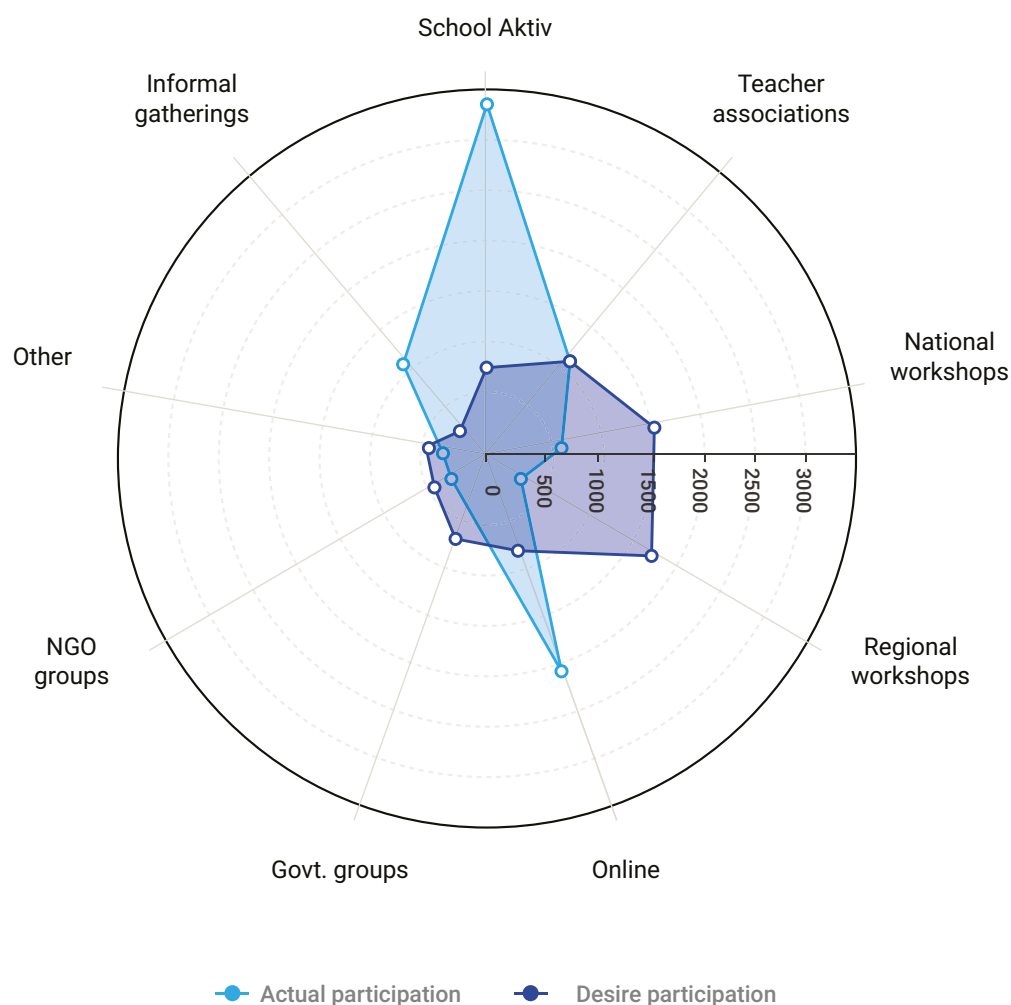
What does CoP engagement look like?

Respondents in North Macedonia primarily engage in CoPs to share and access practical classroom materials. Other forms of engagement such as professional dialogue, collaboration or networking hold a secondary role. Participation is highest in School Aktivs (in which 74 per cent of respondents participate), which are also considered the most accessible (76 per cent) and most effective (62 per cent) form of CoP. Other modalities of engagement such as online platforms and subject-specific teacher association see much more moderate levels of participation (51 and 31 per cent respectively).

While the majority engage through familiar structures such as School Aktivs, broader forms of CoP engagement remain less common, and **there is unmet desire for further regional (42 per cent) and national (38 per cent) collaboration**. While foundational engagement exists, deeper and more diverse models are yet to be fully realized.

- **Engagement is practical but not explicitly oriented to teacher professional development (TPD):** Teachers in North Macedonia report moderate engagement levels overall (average engagement score 5.3 on a 1–10 scale). Engagement is resource-driven within institutionalized groups such as Aktivs, and participation in collaborative, dialogic or leadership-based CoPs is more limited.
- **Subject-based CoP participation is fragmented and shaped by subject specialization:** Information and communications technology (ICT) and science teachers participate the most in subject-specific CoPs (41 per cent in ICT and 38 per cent in mathematics and science). Language and social science teachers participate at similar levels (37 per cent), while teachers in vocational subjects hold the lowest subject-specific engagement (17 per cent). This may suggest unequal professional learning opportunities by discipline.
- **Perceptions of effectiveness cluster around digital and school-based platforms:** 62 per cent of teachers view School Aktivs as effective, and 56 per cent say the same for online platforms. NGO and government-led CoPs trail behind (<6 per cent), indicating the former models may currently be better aligned with contemporary teacher needs.
- **Wider participation is associated with perceived impact on TPD:** Each additional CoP a teacher participated in is associated with a small but statistically significant likelihood of reporting a positive impact on professional development ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = 0.001$).
- **Desired participation points to unmet demand:** Teachers show notably higher interest in joining CoPs such as regional or national-level workshops (42 and 38 per cent respectively indicated they wanted to engage with these groups) than in current rates of participation (10 and 12 per cent respectively). There is a mismatch between actual and desired participation in structured CoPs.

Figure 3. Actual versus desired participations in CoPs



What motivates CoP participation?

Teachers are primarily motivated to participate in CoPs to access concrete teaching support. The most cited reasons for engagement include enhancing teaching skills (60 per cent) and accessing lesson plans or new materials (52 per cent). This is reflected in the most sought-after content in CoPs, with lesson plans including interactive activities and curricular resources being the most common materials teachers looked for (60 and 51 per cent respectively).

"In every way, I want to be a better version of myself, first of all. I want to feel fulfilled after finishing the working day. How nice my day was ... and interesting. Yeah, for the children. I feel satisfied with what I have accomplished, it motivates me further in life and work."

Preschool teacher

North Macedonia

Motivations vary by experience level, and early career teachers are the most likely to engage for confidence-building, classroom ideas and peer exchange. In total, 77 per cent of teachers with 0–4 years of experience sought to improve their teaching with CoP participation, compared with 44 per cent among those with over 30 years of experience.

What are the key barriers to engagement?

Data from the research suggest that while there is moderate CoP engagement in North Macedonia, many teachers face practical and informational barriers that prevent participation. Among teachers who report minimal or no engagement in CoPs, **42 per cent say they do not know how or where to join a CoP**. Crucially, these teachers are not disinterested, and **67 per cent of those reporting low participation still consider CoPs as valuable for professional development**. This indicates a substantial knowledge gap, and points to a mismatch between intent and access, with motivation existing without a corresponding system for onboarding and inclusion.

“Lack of time can be a challenge, yes ... with teachers working two shifts, and maybe not all of them can join the training. Although, for each training we send them a recording afterwards for those who are not there. We used to get feedback from teachers, now there is none, there is no time to dedicate to [it]. So, time can be ... an obstacle.”

CoP manager

North Macedonia

Other structural barriers also shape participation. Workload and time constraints is the most frequently cited challenge with 59 per cent of teachers identifying this as their primary barrier to engage with CoPs. Other attitudinal or skill-based barriers such as a lack of confidence (12 per cent), a lack of ICT skills (10 per cent), or not seeing the value in participating (7 per cent) are much less salient. Respondents indicated support for clear initiatives to encourage participation, however, and 40 per cent of respondents supported structured professional development linked to CoPs, while 34 per cent supported the formal certification of CoP participation. **These findings suggest that motivation and the perceived value of participation in CoPs are high, but structural conditions hinder sustained engagement.**

How can we encourage engagement?

CoPs offer a practical and scalable model for TPD in North Macedonia. There is an immediate opportunity to expand CoP use 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. Close information gaps to widen access. Clear and accessible guidance is essential for scaling CoP participation. Many teachers who do not engage in CoPs are unaware of how or where to join them, despite seeing CoPs as valuable. Overall, 32 per cent of respondents who experienced challenges indicated that a lack of information about how and where to join a CoP was a barrier, rising to 42 per cent among those demonstrating no or minimal CoP participation. Closing this information gap by making information on CoPs and how to access them widely available is essential for inclusion, and efforts must focus on prioritizing targeted information dissemination and clearer access pathways, especially among less engaged groups who nonetheless recognize CoPs as valuable for TPD.



2. Integrate CoPs into national TPD frameworks. Recognizing CoP participation as part of formal professional development frameworks can legitimize engagement and align membership with teacher incentives. This move would reflect support among respondents for linking CoPs to structured development (40 per cent) and formally certifying participation (34 per cent). Implementation options should include incorporating CoP engagement into teacher evaluations, awarding TPD credits for sustained participation, and embedding CoP training and information into pre-service and in-service teacher development.



3. Tailor support to career stage. Motivations to participate with CoPs differ across the teaching career. Although 77 per cent of early career teachers (0–4 years of experience) report joining CoPs to improve their teaching while only 44 per cent of those with over 30 years do so. Less experienced teachers seek practical materials and development of foundational skills, while more experienced teachers are drawn to mentoring and professional collaboration. These findings reveal the need for differentiated support by offering pedagogical guidance for early career teachers, while developing leadership roles for senior educators to meet evolving teacher needs throughout career stages.



4. Expand and diversify participation formats. Flexible CoP modalities are key for inclusive engagement.

While 74 per cent of teachers participate in School Aktivs, other formats are underutilized, and while 51 per cent engage with online platforms, engagement with subject-specific groups is lower at 31 per cent. Desired participation is notably higher than current patterns too, and 42 per cent of teachers expressed a strong interest in regional CoPs. While being cognizant of the potential costs associated with regional CoP development, initiatives may want to focus on strengthening inclusive hybrid modalities, but while looking to build scalable regional formats that match teacher demands.

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Via degli Alfani, 58
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Email: innocenti@unicef.org

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