



POLICY BRIEF

More than a Meeting

Building effective teacher communities of practice in Serbia

Teachers across Serbia are engaged in communities of practice (CoPs), with teaching background shaping both the nature of engagement and perceived value of participation. This research highlights what motivates teachers, common barriers to participation, and how CoPs can be designed and supported to nurture their professional impact.

KEY FINDINGS

- **High participation with varying depth:** 80 per cent of respondents demonstrate average CoP participation, with 15 per cent showing strong participation. Pre-primary teachers report higher engagement than colleagues in primary education.
- **Practical resources drive engagement:** Teachers most commonly engage with CoPs to gather teaching resources, improve teaching skills and receive feedback.
- **Impact is linked to participation depth:** Analysis shows that how teachers participate with CoPs is a more significant predictor of perceived impact than the numbers of CoPs participated in.
- **Barriers are practical, not attitudinal:** 82 per cent of respondents believe CoP participation is beneficial for professional development, including respondents demonstrating no/little CoP participation. Time, workload and knowledge barriers inhibit participation.

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 Serbia. UNICEF Serbia has been engaged with CoPs for the past seven years as a standard component of capacity-building for preschools, schools and educators, and with other forms of CoPs since 2012. Capacity-building initiatives are planned and implemented as a cyclical training process, including collaborative mentoring, professional networking and continuous support via capacity-building. Preschool education programmes in Serbia usually combine blended trainings using active learning methods and learning by doing, collaborative peer mentoring and CoPs supporting educator peer learning.

This brief offers insight into the national dynamics of teacher engagement in CoPs. It summarizes key findings from a national, self-administered online survey of teachers and educators conducted between December 2024 and April 2025. 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 1,361 respondents, 105 were male (8 per cent) and 1,256 were female (92 per cent).
- 6 per cent of respondents were aged under 30, 18 per cent aged 31–40, 25 per cent aged 41–50 and 50 per cent aged 51–65.
- 613 respondents were primary, secondary or vocational teachers, and 748 worked in pre-primary/kindergarten institutions. This presents a slight skew towards early education professionals in this data.
- 13 per cent respondents held 0–4 years of teaching experience, 30 per cent held 5–9 years, 30 per cent held 10–19 years, 30 per cent held 20–29 years and 13 per cent held 30 years or more of experience.
- Southern and Eastern Serbia accounted for 423 respondents (31 per cent), Šumadija 369 (27 per cent), Vojvodina 322 (24 per cent), and Belgrade 247 (27 per cent).

How do teachers engage with communities of practice?

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

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

Figure 1. CoP participation scale of primary teachers by grades

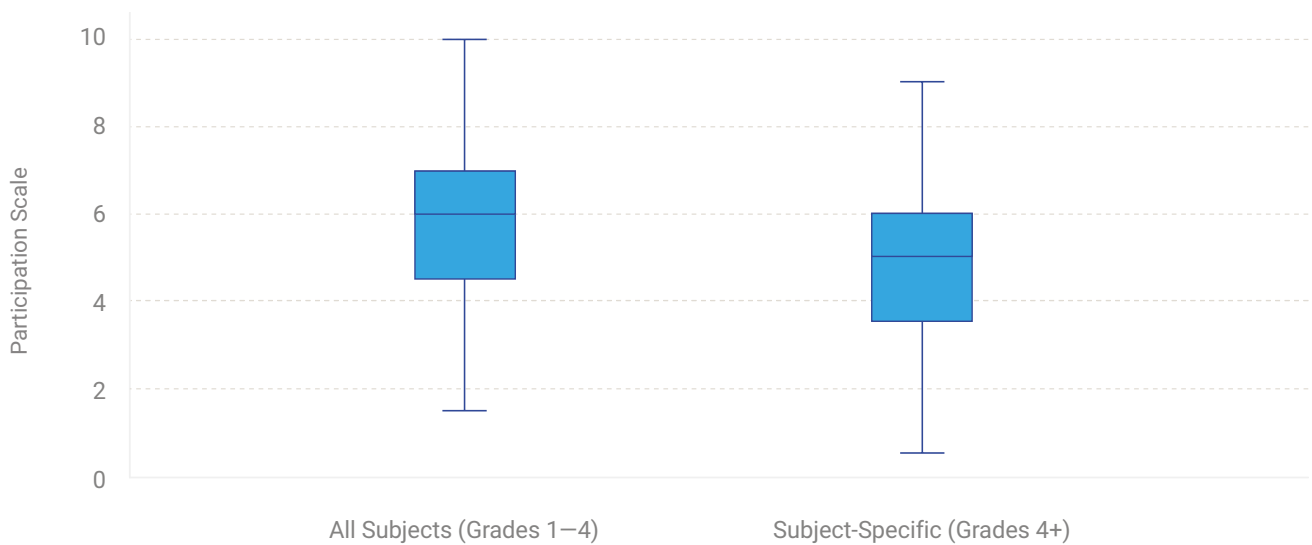
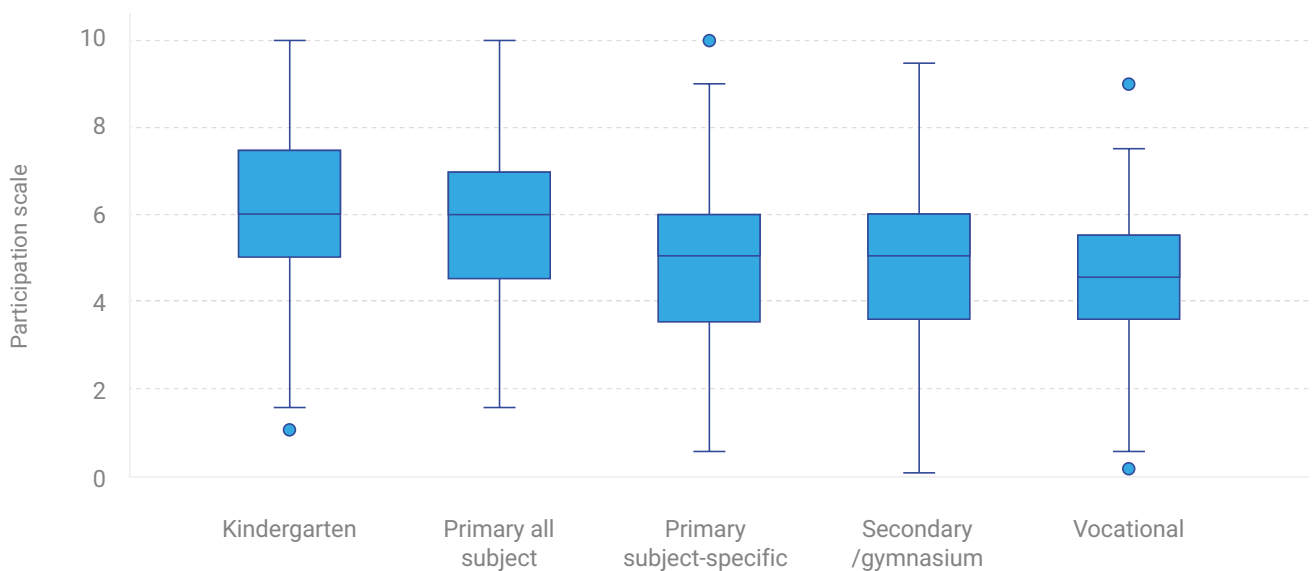


Figure 2. CoP participation scale by teaching level



Responses on engagement habits and frequency were used to calculate a teacher participation scale, which acts as a proxy for depth of CoP engagement. Scores range from 0 to 10, with those scoring 10 participating in all five ways and those scoring 0 never engaging in any of these ways.

In Serbia, the average CoP participation scale score is 5.6. This suggests moderate CoP engagement levels across the sample, but there are notable differences between groups. All-subject primary school teachers show an average participation score of 5.8, which is higher than subject-specific primary teachers, who score an average of 5.1. Similarly, there

are also notable differences between teaching levels, with preschool teachers holding the highest participation scale score on average (6.0), followed by all-subject primary teachers (5.8), subject-specific primary teachers (5.1), secondary or gymnasium teachers (4.9), and vocational teachers (4.3). While female teachers report higher CoP participation than male colleagues (5.7 versus 4.7), findings should be interpreted with caution, given the underrepresentation of male respondents in the sample (8 per cent) compared to national teaching workforces in Serbia (30 per cent).¹

Teachers under 30 and those with fewer than five years of experience report the highest levels of CoP participation (mean score 6.0). Participation then declines among mid- and late-career teachers, as well as among older age groups. These findings emphasize the importance of CoPs as a support mechanism for early-career teachers who usually rely on practical content, while also highlighting the need to sustain engagement throughout teaching careers.

How do teachers engage with CoPs?

Teachers in Serbia primarily engage with CoPs for classroom-focused content. School Aktivs, in which participation is mandated, are the most common format, with 78 per cent of respondents participating and 68 per cent considering them the most accessible format. Online platforms also see high uptake compared with other modalities (59 per cent), while informal groups such as teacher-led meetings are less common (22 per cent). Participation in subject-specific teacher associations is lower (32 per cent), **but those who do engage often rate them as effective (65 per cent).**

In contrast, effectiveness ratings for School Aktivs (53 per cent) and online CoPs (58 per cent) are slightly more modest, suggesting **participation groups is not always aligned to the perceived value of participation or the effectiveness of CoPs.** Qualitative data revealed more holistic understandings of the kinds of groups which are considered effective, with several respondents emphasizing the potential effectiveness of non-formal groups such as casual teacher gatherings.

¹ OECD, Results from TALIS 2024: Serbia. OECD, Paris, 2024. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/results-from-talis-2024-country-notes_e127f9e2-en/serbia_fe4beb90-en.html.

“The School Aktiv in which I participated ... has not ... influenced my professional learning. But the informal and ad hoc communities have influenced my professional learning immeasurably, and I cannot find the numbers to describe them. I could simply list a series of people who are responsible for that, who let’s say laid the foundation stone for those informal ad hoc communities.”

Gymnasium teacher

Serbia

- **Pedagogical content dominates participation rationales.** More than for networking or professional reflection, CoPs are often used to improve teaching skills through practices such as sharing lesson plans (46 per cent), reading lesson plans (46 per cent) and accessing curricular resources (29 per cent). However, more reflective or developmental practices are rarer, and only 21 per cent engage in self-reflection, 11 per cent build professional relationships and 8 per cent seek growth opportunities.
- **Subject-specific CoPs show promise:** Uptake in subject-specific groups is highest among information and communications technology (ICT) (48 per cent), science (45 per cent) and mathematics (44 per cent) teachers. Both mother tongue and foreign language teachers show comparatively lower engagement (38 per cent). However, in general, subject-specific groups are seen as the most effective participation modality (65 per cent), despite lower participation overall (32 per cent).
- **Role differences shape perceived effectiveness:** Preschool and kindergarten teachers are more likely to find School Aktivs effective (63 per cent) than colleagues working in primary schools (41 per cent). This may reflect stronger alignment of capacity-building models, or more collaborative school cultures.
- **Key demographic trends:** Teachers under 30 are most likely to engage with online platforms (61 per cent of the age group do so). School Aktivs are considered most effective by kindergarten/pre-primary teachers, and participation levels do not significantly differ by rural/urban locations.
- **Appetite for regional collaboration cuts across roles:** Despite differences in engagement patterns between groups, 39 per cent of respondents across education levels and subject areas express a desire to participate in regional workshops. There are also clear trends in preferred modalities, with hybrid models representing the most preferred format (51 per cent), followed by in-person only (39 per cent). Online-only participation is generally unpopular, with only 9 per cent of respondents seeking these modalities in the future.

What motivates CoP participation?

CoP participation is driven by the desire to strengthen practical skills. The most frequently cited motivation is improving teaching skills (77 per cent) through strategies such as accessing resources (41 per cent) and sharing resources or ideas (33 per cent).

This pattern reflects a practical orientation, in which CoPs are viewed to support pedagogy rather than avenues for career advancement.

“For me personally, [CoPs are] always an opportunity to learn something. Any community, any exchange ... any seminar ... is an opportunity to hear each other ... to exchange and learn from each other. And I think that’s something irreplicable in our professional work.”

Primary school associate

Serbia

Content preferences reflect this demand for relevant support. Teachers seek best practices for developing classroom programmes (46 per cent) and documenting children’s learning (44 per cent), with the former rising to 72 per cent and the latter to 57 per cent among preschool teachers. **CoPs therefore generally seem to function as peer-driven spaces to enhance day-to-day work, rather than as teacher professional development (TPD) networks.**

What are the key barriers to engagement?

Teachers in Serbia face significant practical barriers which limit the ability to participate in CoPs. Of those surveyed, 44 per cent report challenges to participation, with excessive workload and a lack of time cited by 80 per cent. Workload constraints are acute among primary subject-specific (grade 4+) teachers (experienced by 86 per cent) and all-subject primary teachers (experienced by 94 per cent).

Information gaps also hinder wider participation. Although only 15 per cent of those facing challenges say they do not know how to join a CoP, this figure jumps to 41 per cent among teachers demonstrating no or little engagement. **Even though this most disengaged group is small, among these respondents there is nonetheless an access and awareness issue.**

“Information, or rather, insufficient information [is a barrier]. That is, [what is needed is] some, let’s call it a central registry or something, that would give people [teachers] the opportunity to decide, to make their own decisions [about participating in CoPs]. Because I notice that many people don’t even know that there are some groups, they have never heard of them. So, if they are overwhelmed, there should be someone who will bring all of that closer to them, say at the school level.”

Vocational school teacher

Serbia

Other barriers such as confidence to participate (13 per cent) or a lack of ICT skills (14 per cent) are far less common. These findings suggest that **structural and informational issues, rather than individual preparedness, are the main barriers experienced by teachers in Serbia**. Despite these barriers, 82 per cent of respondents believe CoP engagement positively contributes to TPD. Even among teachers who show no or little participation, **68 per cent still see CoPs as effective for TPD**. This emphasizes that **disengagement is not due to scepticism, and is far more likely to stem from structural barriers**. This provides a clear rationale for policy responses to focus on time allocation, awareness-raising and further embedding CoPs into TPD pathways.

How can CoP engagement be encouraged?

Findings show there is significant potential for the proliferation of CoPs for TPD in Serbia. Actions must be targeted, collaborative, and strategically aligned with education policy and the local school realities, leveraging the expertise of UNICEF and national stakeholders.



1. Leverage School Aktivs as an opportunity for deeper engagement.

School Aktivs are the most widely used CoP format (used by 78 per cent of teachers), and they provide a unique entry point to enhance pedagogical dialogue. Widespread use of Aktivs can be supported by drawing on practices from subject-specific and online CoPs, particularly those engaged with by science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) teachers, who already demonstrate broader CoP participation. Strengthening the structure, facilitation, relevance and thematic focus of Aktivs, including via introducing practices such as reflective practice, can deepen pedagogical and professional value, and minimize the risks of sharing poor practices.



2. Increase motivation through existing policy frameworks. Currently, 43 per cent of respondents support formalizing CoP membership through recognizing and embedding CoP participation within professional development pathways. While support for this is already high, there is a mismatch between this and existing pathways for certifying and recognizing CoP participation which already exist in Serbia. Advocacy and promotion initiatives to emphasize existing structural support and integration could further increase participation, and proliferate understanding of diverse professional development pathways.



3. Expand and support subject-specific CoPs, particularly in underrepresented disciplines. Subject-based CoPs are rated as effective by 65 per cent of those who engage with them. This is higher than School Aktivs (53 per cent) and online groups (58 per cent). While engagement levels are lower than other groups, perhaps due to an unequal distribution of opportunities or potential skews in the data towards non-subject-specific teachers, perceived impact is nonetheless notably higher among those who do participate in these subject groups. Expanding subject-specific CoPs with a focus on underrepresented disciplines can enhance relevance, foster expertise and build stronger professional identities.



4. Focus on quality of engagement for long-term quality. Engagement depth more strongly predicts the perceived benefit of CoP participation than the number of CoPs joined, with teachers showing average or strong participation being over three times more likely to report positive impact. Encouraging regular engagement may be more effective in improving teacher outcomes. Novice teachers also report high perceived benefits from CoP engagement, likely due to mentorship and peer-learning opportunities. Developing models which prioritize early-career teachers – with structure and subject-relevant support from more experienced colleagues – can help build long-term quality and regional sustainability.

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