

## Principal’s Role in Supporting Teacher Collaborative Learning

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Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>Teacher collaborative learning remains one of the fundamental methods of teacher professional development. Due to various factors, teachers have to be encouraged, counselled, and supported for taking part in such activities and that competence is commonly entrusted to principals. This research investigates the role of the principal in supporting teachers’ participation in collaborative learning activities. The study was conducted through the mixed-method approach and the data were collected from 518 teachers and eight principals of 24 schools in Kosovo. Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to analyze the quantitative data and the qualitative ones were explored through the thematic analysis. According to teachers’ responses, principals employ a number of methods and offer teachers strong support for attending learning activities. Principals narrated that collaborative learning is a complex process and they have to apply various approaches, including authoritative, democratic, and instructional leadership styles, for maintaining a collaborative culture in their schools. They also revealed that collaborative learning takes place mainly in professional communities, mentoring pairs, and collective collaborative events, which are still implemented according to the traditional approaches. The findings show that newer and more advanced collaborative learning models are not applied in the research context. The research recommends that Kosovo schools should start utilizing other forms of collaborative learning and should modernize the current ones because they are insufficient and incompatible with contemporary requirements. Further similar research is recommended as such studies are almost inexistent in the research context.</i></p>	<p><b>Article History:</b>  <i>Received</i>                      March 21, 2021   <i>Accepted</i>                      October 25, 2021</p> <hr/> <p><b>Keywords:</b>                      principals,                      teacher                      collaborative                      learning,                      professional                      communities,                      mentoring pairs</p>

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**Introduction**

Teaching is a collaborative, competitive, and complex profession. It requires continuous refinements in order for teachers to master the skills, knowledge, and methods needed for completing their tasks professionally, accountably, and successfully. Consequently, the top performing education systems encourage and support their teachers to involve in various learning activities leading to their professional development (Fullan, 2014). Evidently, teachers learn in different ways and formats for developing professionally, but Knight (2009) maintains, "Teachers engage in professional development every day—they just don't do it with professional developers. Teachers learn from each other all the time by sharing lesson plans, assessments, activities, and ideas about individual students" (p. 3). In addition, according to Eraut (2014), teachers learn much more from each other than from formal learning activities since situations are concrete and feedback is instantaneous. Also, activities conducted in a cooperative spirit strengthen collegial relations, which lead to a greater trust, collaborative climate, and more personal and professional support (Servage, 2008; Stoll, 2010).

Teacher collaboration has attracted the attention of various scholars, who have identified the existence of positive correlations between teacher collaborative activities, instructional improvements, and students' attainment (Goddard, Goddard & Tschannen-Moran 2007; Lyna, Hung & Chong, 2016). Furthermore, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) caution, "Teachers will be short on professional capital if



they spend most of their professional time alone, if they do not get feedback and support from colleagues” (p. 102). Additionally, Goddard, Goddard and Tschannen-Moran (2007) argue, “The more teachers collaborate, the more they are able to converse knowledgeably about theories, methods, and process of teaching and learning, and thus improve their instruction” (p. 879).

Teacher collaborative learning as a process that involves two or more teachers, working on resolving various educational challenges and enhancing their professionalism, is applied traditionally in Kosovo's schools, where the research was conducted. Due to its importance, collaborative learning has been listed in a number of policies and bylaws as a compulsory prerequisite for the school personnel. For instance, the latest Curriculum Framework on the Pre-University Education (CFPUE), which was launched in 2016, stipulates that teacher collaboration is fundamental for the improvement of teaching and learning quality. Amongst others, the document stipulates, “Teachers shall engage in teamwork and cooperate with the professional community on planning lessons, exchanging experiences about the learning process, and evaluating the gradual progress of students throughout the school year” (p. 56). Other bylaws also describe professional communities as mechanisms that contribute to the increase of teaching and learning quality as teachers exchange experiences and produce materials jointly in these forums.

It should also be borne in mind that teachers usually have busy schedules, therefore, their collaboration is often affected by different factors (Brook, Rimm-Kaufman, 2007; Yuan & Zhang, 2016). As a result, they need to be encouraged, advised, and supported for engaging in such activities and this duty is usually entrusted to principals (Edwards, 2011; Hord, 1997). The instructions included in

Kosovo's legislation also recognize that principals are the driving force behind teacher collaborative learning and they have a critical role in creating the necessary environment enabling teacher collaboration.

Considering the importance that Kosovo's policies and various scholars attribute to the teacher collaborative learning and the role of the principal in it, this research investigated the role of the principal in creating and maintaining a collaborative learning culture in the school. The goal was to understand what are the most common methods utilized by the principals to support the participation of teachers in collaborative learning activities as well as the challenges they encounter in this process. The topic was explored by analyzing teachers' opinions, expressed through an assessment scale, and narratives shared by principals via interviews. This article includes only a portion of the findings of the doctoral research, which explored the role of the principal in supporting the professional development of teachers in Kosovo.

### **Theoretical Background**

Literature recognizes that teacher collaborative learning is organized in various formats, including peer mentoring (Schwille, 2008; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000), professional learning communities (Wahlstrom & Seashore Louis, 2008; Senge 2006), coaching (Miller & Stewart, 2013; Knight, 2007), study groups (Mullen & Huntiger 2008; Post & Varoz, 2008), action research (Wood, 2017; Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart & Zuber-Skerrit (2002), and other models. Scholars also maintain that principals play a major role in the process of collaborative learning. However, the literature reviewed below focuses primarily on peer mentoring and professional learning communities



(PLCs) and the role of the principal in creating a learning conducive environment for teachers.

### **Teacher Collaborative Learning: Mentorships and PLCs**

Scholars predict that 21<sup>st</sup> century schools will depend on the professional capacities of their members, their dedication to innovation, and their commitment to professional collaboration (Schleicher, 2015; Bryk, Bender-Sebring, Allensworth, Lupescu, Easton, 2010; Eraut 2014). One of the most commonly school-based collaborative learning formats is peer mentoring which is a dynamic process that requires continuous communication between the mentor and mentee. Mentors are expected to possess advanced judgmental skills and deep knowledge of the subject matter. According to Schwille (2008), mentoring is a method aimed at helping mainly novice and pre-service teachers to bridge the learned theories and practices with real classroom situations. He also found that mentoring takes place in the presence and absence of students or as he describes 'inside the action and outside the action.' Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) believe that mentoring is an approach that will enhance teacher professionalization and will improve schools in the 21st century. They theorized that mentorship as a professional method should be offered to all the teachers, irrespective of one's experience and tenure.

Teachers collaborate closely and learn together through PLCs, which aid them to accumulate pedagogical knowledge, to enhance their instructional and assessment methods, and to implement curriculum successfully (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). PLCs also help building of positive relationships inside and outside the school (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Educationalists use a variety of formulations to describe PLCs, but the common denominator is that they are groups of professionals learning and working together aiming

at enhancing their knowledge and skills leading to the improvement of students' attainment. For instance, Mitchell and Sackney (2000) define PLCs as "A group of people who take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning-oriented, and growth-promoting approach toward the mysteries, problems, and perplexities of teaching and learning" (p. 12). In addition, Kiefer and Senge (1982) theorized that members of PLCs are united people that "Transcend their personal limitations and realize a collective synergy" (p. 1). Collay, Dunlap, Enloy and Gagnon (1998) stipulated that learning in a community of professionals is the opposite of isolation as it develops in an interactive environment, where individual contribution is an integral part of a systematic learning process. According to Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2007), PLCs may have a significant impact on changing the school culture, collaboration between teachers, and teachers' focus on student learning.

### **Principals' Support for Collaborative Learning**

Nowadays schools are operating in a rapidly changing world, which requires continuous changes, whose management is usually entrusted to the principals. They have to work with and to address the needs of teachers, students, parents, school bodies, institutional representatives, local community, and external stakeholders (Lortie, 2009). Various administrative, pedagogical, infrastructural, and developmental aspects of schools depend on principals' decisions. For a successful fulfilment of their tasks, principals have to master and apply a wide spectrum of leadership approaches during a single day (Fullan, Rincon-Gallardo & Hargreaves, 2015). Scholars also note that principals have a major, but indirect role in schools' performance. For instance, Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) concluded, "Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among



all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 5).

Various scholars underscore that one of the primary tasks of a principal is to create an environment that fosters teacher professional improvement leading to better student and school results. Bubb and Earley (2007) posit, "Leading and managing people and their development have to be seen as a central part of the responsibility of managing the school's total resources" (p. 7). In addition, Kouzes and Posner (2002) maintain, "The leader's primary contribution is in the recognition of good ideas, the support of those ideas, and the willingness to challenge the system to get new products, processes, services, and systems adopted" (p. 17). Furthermore, Bellamy, Fulmer, Murphy, Muth (2007) theorize, "Effective principals do not simply accept the goals established by professional associations or political representatives" (p. 67). Fullan (2008) considers that 21<sup>st</sup> century principals are expected to lead knowledgeably and to support the "interactions that keep teachers at that level through continuous application and refinement" (p. 25). Meanwhile, according to Edwards (2011), "To be effective, teachers must be provided with an environment that helps to build professionalism" (p. 135).

According to, Brook, Sawyer, & Rimm-Kaufman (2007), teacher collaboration may be formal and informal. They found that the first type of teacher collaboration is initiated by principals and takes place in formal learning events. The latter is initiated by teachers and occurs before or after working hours, during breaks or events organized by the school. Other scholars have found that principals have the main say in the structural composition of PLCs by grouping teachers into collaborative teams based on department, content area, and/or grade level (Hallam, Smith, Hite, Hite, & Wilcox, 2015). Furthermore,

Bellamy, Fulmer, Murphy and Muth (2007) posit principals may be guardians of school's values if, "Principals are in a unique position to influence the development of community values, if they choose to lead actively in the public arena. Such leadership occurs as principals engage others in conversations that have the potential for conflicting views" (p. 74). Meanwhile, drawing on personal experience as school principals, Dufour and Mattos (2013) consider that today's "Schools need learning leaders who create a school-wide focus on learning both for students and the adults who serve them" (p. 39).

Thus, irrespective of positive relationships between the teachers of a school and their commitment to learning, teacher collaboration does not happen on its own. Teachers need to be encouraged, counselled, and organized for partaking in collaborative learning activities. In the majority of cases, such a support is provided by principals, who have the responsibility, authority and competencies to create a collaborative learning culture in the schools they run. On the other hand, teacher collaboration is not part of teacher and principal education programs. As a result, it often turns into a difficult and challenging process that requires a strong commitment, professional experience, and resolute leadership.

### **Methodology**

This research, which was focused on examining the role of the principal in supporting teacher collaborative learning, was conducted in 24 primary lower secondary schools in four major towns in Kosovo. It started with the exploration of teachers' opinions about the methods applied by principals to support teacher collaborative learning. The second phase included interviews with principals, who shared their experiences related to the research topic. Kosovo's respective legal





framework was also considered because it contains details that affect teacher collaborative learning and principals' role in it.

### **Research Purpose**

Literature analyzing aspects of teacher collaborative learning is abundant, but empirical studies that explore the opinions of teachers about and experiences of principals with this process are sparse. Such research is almost non-existent in the research context, Kosovo, even though continuous teacher professional development is considered to be an instrument that will help the improvement of teachers' quality leading to a better students' attainment. Kosovo students have participated in the Program for International Students Assessment (PISA) in 2015 and 2018, but in spite of investments in the teacher education programs and opportunities, they were ranked in both cases the third from the bottom of the list (OECD, 2016). Acknowledging this failure, Kosovo's Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST) announced profound reforms. As a first step, the Ministry launched the Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021, which describes teacher professional development and empowerment of school leadership as two out of seven main components expected to improve the quality of teaching and student attainment.

Teacher education and professional development Kosovo have undergone tremendous changes over the last three decades. Due to political developments in Kosovo, teachers were prevented from taking part in any professional development program from 1990 to 1999. Collaborative activities were the only possibility for them to discuss the professional challenges. But the situation changed after 1999, when they could attend different learning activities, delivered by various domestic and international institutions. In addition, after 1999, teachers were asked to change their teaching approach from teacher-

centered to student-centered teaching, focused on developing students' competences. They were also offered various training programs, including collaborative activities, aiming at assisting them to fulfill the new requirements.

Even though collaborative learning is one of the key approaches of teacher professional development worldwide, not only in Kosovo, teachers are often prevented from taking part in such activities due to various distractors. However, literature and Kosovo's legislation stipulate that one of the primary tasks of a principals is to create a collaborative learning conducive environment in the schools. Given that schools may utilize a broad array of collaborative learning methods and considering principal's role in this process, this research will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What is the opinion of teachers about the methods applied by the principals to support teacher collaborative learning?
2. What are the experiences of principals pertaining to their support for teacher collaborative learning?

### **Research Methods**

The research employed the mix-method approach, the goal of which, as Gay, Mills, and Arian (2012) conclude, is "To build on the synergy and strength that exists between quantitative and qualitative research methods to understand a phenomenon more fully than is possible using either quantitative or qualitative methods alone" (p. 483). Research methods' theoreticians note that the mixed methods may utilize a number of typologies for collection of data. This research employed the explanatory sequential typology, which "involves a two-phase data collection project in which the researcher collects quantitative data in the first phase, analyses the results, and then uses



the results to plan (or build onto) the second, qualitative phase” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 221). Furthermore, Gay et al (2012) posit that the use of more sources of information is a form of triangulation that contributes to the trustworthiness of a research study. Thus, a review of the respective legislation was also conducted, which helped the researcher to identify a number of issues that affect the topic of the research in different aspects.

The mixed-method approach was deemed adequate for this research given that due to various factors and experiences, teachers and principals may have different perceptions about the collaborative learning and the role of the principal in supporting this process. For instance, Maund (2003) maintains that due to perceptions, one may have various opinions about the same issue under different circumstances. Thus, their realities about a phenomenon they are asked to evaluate or describe are not more valid than the truths of other participants. In such a case, numbers or words alone are insufficient for understanding a problem, therefore, quantitative and qualitative data are complementary.

### **Data Collection, Instruments, and Analysis**

This research applied the explanatory sequential approach and the data were collected from October 2019 to March 2020. The quantitative data were collected first through an evaluation scale, which contained 11 closed-ended questions seeking to understand teachers’ opinions about the methods applied by the principals to foster collaborative learning. Respondents were requested to give their opinions by selecting one of the five-point Likert scale options varying from (5) strongly agree to (1) strongly disagree. However, the researcher was more “interested in how many [respondents] are in one side and how many are in the other side” (Gosavi, 2015, p. 28). Thus,

for the sake of analysis, the answers were collapsed through the SPSS software into three groups. The strongly agree and agree answers were collapsed into one group, termed agree; the strongly disagree and disagree answers were combined into the group named disagree; and the neutral responses were treated separately. The data from the questionnaires were processed using methods of descriptive and inferential statistics. The statistical procedures employed were: frequency distribution of the attributive variables, basic descriptive statistics of the numerical variables (mean, standard deviation), factor analysis to test the instrument validity and Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient as a measure of instrument reliability. The scale reached a high level of reliability ( $\alpha = 0.893$ ). Its validity was explained through the first factor, which explained 49.1% of the variance.

In addition, the qualitative data, collected through semi-structured interviews with eight principals were recorded fully, transcribed verbatim, and translated from the Albanian into English language. All the interviews were conducted from February to March 2019 and occurred in principals' offices. The average time of interviews was 46 minutes, ranging from 36 to 67 minutes.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the dataset. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue, "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). According to them it is also a method that "Reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants" (p. 81). Referring to their recommendations, the researcher firstly familiarized himself with the data during the transcription of the interviews, which led to the generation of initial codes. This method allowed the researcher to identify common as well as particular themes depicting the experiences encountered by the principals while trying to support and



maintain a collaborative learning culture in their schools. Following an exhaustive reading of the transcripts, the researcher identified and coded accordingly the main themes related to principal's role in teacher collaborative learning. An educational leadership expert, who is a friend of the researcher, was asked to read the transcripts and to generate her own codes. Afterwards, they compared their notes, findings, and conclusions, which led to the creation of the themes presented below. The goal of their conversation was to pave the path to replicability of the research and to ensure research validity and reliability as defined by Creswell and Creswell (2018).

While preparing the questions for the quantitative and qualitative parts of the research and analyzing the dataset, the researcher was impacted by theories on instructional and transformational leadership in education, which are described as styles that encourage continuous staff professional development leading to improved services offered by the individuals and collective of an organization. Hoy and Hoy (2013) argue, "Instructional leadership calls for principals to work with teacher colleagues to improve instruction by providing a school culture and climate where change is linked to the best available knowledge about student learning" (p. 3). Furthermore, Bass and Riggio (2006) posit, "Transformational leaders motivate others to do more than they originally intended and often even more than they thought possible" (p. 4). The author believes that principals that possess such traits may ensure a collaborative learning environment in the schools irrespective of external circumstances and possible impediments.

The questions included in the evaluation scale were formed based on different research studies that explore teacher learning models and the role of the principal in this process. Thus, scholars have

found that action research is a rather complex teacher learning method, therefore, principal's instructions and support are very important (Marquardt, 2000; Vogrinc & Valencic Zuljan, 2009). Additionally, a lot of coaching and mentorship programs depend on the arrangements made by the principals (Atteberry & Bryk, 2011; Lynch & Ferguson, 2010; Schwille, 2008; Mrvar, Resman, Kalin & Mazgon, 2019). Meanwhile, principals assist the activities of the study groups by setting a clear vision and goals as well as by creating a collaborative environment (Mullen & Huntiger, 2008; Post & Varoz 2008). According to Hord (1997), collaboration may trigger conflicts between the participants, therefore, principals are expected to lower the tensions in order to maintain a positive learning culture in the school. Woodland (2006) concludes that one should not expect from teachers to involve in learning activities if they are not offered clear instructions about the process, and such information is usually provided by the principals. Furthermore, trust in the principal and amongst the cohort affects colleagues' personal and professional relations and school climate (Taschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Handford & Leithwood, 2013). According to Stoll (2010), trust in the principals and colleagues encourages teachers to speak openly about the challenges they face and professional needs they have. In addition, Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) posit that principals have a key role in the establishment of professional learning communities in their school and in supporting them to discuss professional issues. Somprach, Tang and Popoonsak (2015) have also found positive associations between school leadership and professional learning communities. In the view of Harris and Jones (2014), principals are a catalyst of a school culture that supports collective learning. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) promote the idea that principals should not only support teacher learning, but they should also lead learners



by participating personally in learning activities. Meanwhile, Evers, Van der Heijden, Krejins and Gerrichhauzen (2011) found that structural factors impact teachers' participation in learning activities and the support they receive from the supervisors influences their attendance in such programs.

Given that researcher's professional experience stems from organizations that are not focused on educational matters, when analyzing the data, he was influenced by empirical findings and theories on educational leadership and teacher professional development. However, the researcher has been living in Kosovo and due to professional interest has followed carefully education-related developments for 20 years as portrayed by the media. On the other hand, the researcher had no prior knowledge about the participating schools and their personnel. He met only with the principals and only for research purposes. Thus, the interpretations below are made from the perspective of an external researcher based on understandings gained from literature, collected data, and respective policies.

### **Sample**

The research was conducted in 24 primary lower secondary urban schools located in four major municipalities in Kosovo. Since Kosovo is a small country and its policies on teacher education and professional development are almost uniform, random sampling was deemed appropriate for selecting the participating schools and respondents. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires administered to 720 teachers, whose return rate was 72% (n= 518). The demographic characteristics of the subjects included gender, age, employment status, educational background, and work experience. The majority of them were female teachers and less than one quarter of them were males. As for the age, the largest group comprised of

teachers 40-49 years old, less than a quarter of them were 30-39, and little more than a quarter of them were 50-59 years old. In terms of the position, the division between class and subject teachers was almost equal. The highest number of respondents hold Bachelor Degrees and less than one quarter of them have finished Master's studies. Lastly, the vast majority of the participants have been teaching for more than 15 years and only 1.2% of them are novice teachers.

The second sample included eight principals, selected according to the random procedures from the group of 24 schools. Geographical distribution included two principals per town. The average age of the interviewed principals was 46.8 years, ranging from 38 to 56 years old. Their common teaching experience was 14.8 years, varying from 5 to 30 years. And, their average time serving as school principals was 7.5 years, ranging from 1 to 20 years of experience. The participant with 20 years of experience was a deputy-principal for a period of time. In addition, except for one, other seven principals have obtained Master's Degrees, focused on educational leadership.

### **Results**

The data for this research were collected through quantitative and qualitative procedures and instruments. The findings are presented according to the explanatory sequential approach, implying that quantitative findings are presented first and qualitative ones follow. Initially, the quantitative results reveal teachers' opinions about the methods applied by the principals to support their collaborative learning as expressed in an assessment scale. Meanwhile, the qualitative data disclose principals' opinions in this process.





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### **Teachers' Opinion about the Methods Used by the Principals to Support Teacher Collaborative Learning**

As the goal of this research question was to understand how principals facilitate collaborative learning in the schools, respondents were requested to give their opinions about the methods applied by the principal for the creation of a learning environment in the school by selecting one of the five-point scale options varying from (5) strongly agree to (1) to strongly disagree. As already indicated, for the sake of analysis, the selected answers were collapsed into three groups: agree, disagree, and neutral. The distribution of data was assessed through the SPSS software and all the distributions were negatively skewed, with lowest mean 3.99, reached in the fourth item, and highest mean 4.48, reached in the ninth item. The mean scores about various methods applied by the principals to facilitate teachers' participation in collaborative activities ranged from 76.1% to 85.8%, as shown in the Table 1.

Table 1.

*Methods applied by principals for creating a learning environment in school.*

No.	The principal has created collaborative learning environment by:	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1	Supporting teachers to participate in action research, coaching, mentoring, lesson study.	82.6%	13.4%	4.1%
2	Creating a collaborative learning climate and culture in the school that urges teachers to develop such activities.	83.1%	12.0%	4.8%
3	Motivating teachers to share with their colleagues the skills and knowledge they have acquired in various professional development occasions.	83.9%	11.8%	4.3%
4	Encouraging teachers to conduct joint research on the challenges they encounter.	76.1%	16.1%	7.7%
5	Creating a trusting environment in the school where teachers speak freely about their professional needs and challenges.	81.5%	13.6%	4.9%
6	Encouraging teachers to ask for his/her advice about educational issues.	80.9%	14.6%	4.5%
7	Creating a professional learning community in the school.	80.0%	14.9%	5.1%
8	Encouraging teachers to learn and work in teams and groups.	85.8%	9.8%	4.4%
9	Participating in professional development activities together with teachers.	85.1%	9.4%	5.5%
10	Motivating teachers to produce individually or collectively teaching materials adequate for their classes/school.	81.5%	13.3%	5.3%
11	Creating special facilities in the school where teachers may develop professional development activities together.	77.8%	14.1%	8.1%



According to the results from the Table 1, principals offer a solid support to teachers to engage in collaborative learning activities. One of the main methods applied by them is to motivate teachers to learn and work in teams. 85.8% of the respondents agreed with this statement. The next method is by participating in professional development activities alongside the teachers, which was confirmed by 85.1% of the respondents. 83.9% of the respondents admitted that principals have motivated them to share the knowledge they have acquired in different professional development activities. Furthermore, 83.1% of the respondents agreed that principals have created an atmosphere and culture that encourages teachers to develop collaborative activities in the school. 82.6% of the respondents also confirmed that principals have supported them to attend action research, mentoring programs, or study groups. In addition, 81.5% of the respondents agreed that principals have created a trusting environment in the school where teachers may discuss freely their needs. Another 81.5% said that they have also been encouraged to create individually or collectively professional materials. 80.9% of the respondents admitted that principals encouraged them to seek professional advice from her/him. According to 80% of the respondents, principals have created professional communities in their schools. Based on 76.7% of the respondents, principals have created special facilities in the school for teacher learning activities. Lastly, 76.1% of the respondents agreed that principals have encouraged them to conduct joint research about the challenges they are encountering.

These findings indicate that there are various opportunities available for teachers to learn and work collaboratively. They also reveal that teachers are strongly supported by the principals to be part of such activities, which are important for them and the whole school.

Nevertheless, these findings should be considered with caution, as explained in the next section.

### **What are the experiences of principals pertaining to their support for teacher collaborative learning?**

The findings collected through interviews with the principals describe the situations they experienced during their efforts to create collaborative learning environments in the schools they run. They show that principals have a decisive role in facilitating such a process in their schools. Also, the interviewees believe that teacher collaboration in their schools is generally adequate but it needs to be continuously encouraged, cultivated, coordinated, and even imposed if necessary. It was learned that teacher collaboration is affected by a number of factors, such as policies, structural conditions, teacher personality and all these require principals' touch. It was also understood that teachers learn collaboratively primarily through activities of professional communities and mentorship opportunities. Furthermore, findings show that principals create a collaborative learning environment through coordinating the activities of professional communities, arranging mentoring pairs, instructing uncooperative teachers, providing instructional support, and delegating responsibilities.

#### **Professional Communities**

Teacher collaboration in the participating schools is cherished and cultivated as a traditional value, embraced and practiced by senior and novice teachers. However, a more intensive teacher collaboration, according to the principals, is applied in the activities of professional communities, which are divided into two major groups: grade and curricular area professional communities. Every professional



community has a chairperson and hold monthly meetings, which are attended by the principals, unless they are prevented by other obligations.

While the structures of these forums are coordinated and managed by the principals, their activities often depend on the school size, a factor that makes principal's decisions crucial. There are cases when principals of smaller schools have to make different adjustments and coordinate teachers of various grades or curricular area to work together in order to have functional professional communities and quality activities.

Facing such a situation, a principal that leads a small school, narrated:

*"Since we have only two classes per grade, a professional community ended up with two members only. They usually met over a coffee, talked a little, and that was it. That was not an environment where a lot was exchanged or learned. Thus, I brought the teachers of three grades together into one professional community and discussions became richer."*

On the other hand, the situation is completely different in larger schools. For instance, one of the principals explained that her school has more than 100 teachers, who are grouped into different professional communities, meet on a regular basis and have very fruitful discussions. As a result, their activities are more productive, efficient, and collaborative. The principal of such a school explained that she mainly offers instructions about the agendas of the meetings rather than about other issues.

According to another principal, an important activity and task of the professional community in her school is to prepare various student tests. But she noted that she always checks their plans because

she cannot allow, for instance, teachers of social sciences and natural sciences to hold tests in the same week because that would be a burden for the students. This principal believed that she had the professional communities under control, a practice shows that there is a lack of genuine trust, coordination and communication amongst the colleagues since such situations should not be repeated in small organizations as schools are. Therefore, it would be better if the principal worked on improving communication and accountability in the school.

Professional communities also help novice teachers to familiarize with the school's culture and to understand the requirements of their profession concretely given that they are involved in various activities and discussions with more senior colleagues. "The new teachers learn a lot from the professional communities because they are put to work together with colleagues that have been part of the teaching process for years," one of principals said. Thus, professional communities are also platforms enabling novice teachers to understand the educational theories and practices discussed during the preservice studies. They also help them collaborative work between peers, an issue that is usually left unaddressed in the teacher education programs.

### **Mentoring Pairs**

When new teachers join the profession, they usually face various challenges because the classroom reality differs from the theoretical situations studied in academia. As a result, they have to provide answers and interpretations as well as to make assessments and decisions almost every minute. The principals, who are familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of their colleagues, usually ask the more experienced teachers to assist and mentor their novice colleagues



and others in need for assistance. All the interviewed participants confirmed that senior teachers are willing to help and advice their less experienced colleagues.

Sharing a personal experience, one of the principals stated that senior teachers in his school have helped their younger colleagues since the 90s, when he had joined this school as a teacher. "I did learn a lot from them. Fortunately, this tradition has never stopped in our school," he said. This case confirms that collaborative learning was the only professional development method for teachers in the 90s of the last century.

Another principal indicated that peer collaboration depends on mutual respect. It was noted that the majority of novice teachers show great respect for the more experienced teachers and it grows even more when they work together. "We have a teacher that was principal in another school for some time and 90% of our staff call him principal. They do that out of respect for him and his service," the principals said. According to another principal, the roles of senior and novice teachers in mentorship relations have changed over the last years. He explained that even though younger teachers are usually the ones that learn from their senior colleagues, there are also cases when the contrary happens when teachers have to integrate ICT equipment into the educational process.

Even though they take pride in teacher collaboration through mentorship, the principals did not share vibrant examples describing how this approach works in their schools. It is likely that they arrange such pairs but do not follow how they practically collaborate and what is the result of such activities. Given their crucial role in this process, principals are expected to request detailed feedback from both teachers, which would help them to understand the capacities of both

sides and to consider additional assistance if necessary. That would also make both teachers more accountable when working together.

### **Authoritarian, Democratic, Instructional Leadership Approaches**

In spite of the guidance provided in the respective policies and legislation as well as the willingness of teachers, collaborative activities do not happen per se. Teacher collaboration is mostly a result of the persistence of principals, who apply various approaches for avoiding potential threats to the collaborative culture in their schools. Three principals shared completely different experiences they faced while trying to create collaborative environments in their schools. Their examples indicate that principals have the lead role in this process and they have to make difficult decisions in order to ensure the required collaboration amongst the cohorts.

A principal, with 20 years of educational leadership experience, shared two examples when she had to apply, as she said, authoritarian leadership in order that certain staff members of her school to act collaboratively. The first case was with the school's secretary and the second with a substitute teacher. The principal explained that the secretary had graduated from the Faculty of Law and she had expected that she would deal with paperwork only and was reluctant to cooperate with teachers, students, and parents. Given that her negative attitudes affected school's culture, personnel, and students, the principal had several discussions with her and had to train her on the pedagogical aspect. As a result of this, the secretary changed her approach towards school's participants and could even substitute the teachers when they are away.

The same principal had another situation with a substitute teacher, who refused to collaborate with her colleagues. According to the principal, this teacher was thinking she was more professional than





anyone else in the school even though she was teaching for the first time. Describing a discussion with her, the principal said, "I let her know that if she refuses to cooperate with teachers, parents, and students accordingly, then I will have to report her. It was either her or me situation. Someone may see this as a threatening language, but while she worked here, she had no problems with the students, parents, or teachers." According to the principals, following this tough discussion, the teacher was more cooperative, but once her contract was over and she left, she started gossiping about everyone in the school.

These two examples indicate that when teachers resist school's positive culture, principals have to find ways to help and instruct them comply with it. The principal that shared the two cases above has served for 20 years as a school leader. Due to her long and rich experience, she did not hesitate to hold such a strict attitude, which could have generated negative consequences for her as a principal. Her actions also made it clear to the personnel that the same fate awaits them in case they challenge school's culture and her authority.

Often, the role of a principal is to identify, coordinate, and inspire teachers to work in teams or groups. Such inter-independence creates opportunities for teachers to develop individually and collectively. For instance, one of the principals opted for a democratic approach in order to create conditions for her colleagues to work as a team on the implementation of a project. She gathered a group of 12 teachers, presented them the project, and let them work on their own. After receiving the instructions, the group held regular meetings, coordinated all the activities on their own, and managed to implement the project successfully. "In addition to thanking me for bringing them together, they also told me that they had the chance to know their

colleagues better and they got even closer after this activity,” the principal said while describing the process and the end result. In addition to being an example of a successful team work, this case also shows that collaboration forges relations and trust between the colleagues, which lead to an increased collaboration, higher efficiency, and collegial assistance. Also, when teachers are given certain responsibilities, competences, and free hands, they behave more accountably and effectively.

There are also cases when principals have to serve as mentors. For instance, a principal narrated that there was a teacher of arts in his school that could not prepare lesson plans. Usually, she borrowed them from her colleagues, but she wanted to end this practice and let the principal know about her challenge. Given his solid experience as a teacher and a principal, he advised her a couple of times until she finally mastered the method of preparing lesson plans. So, instructional principals encourage teachers to ask for their assistance and help them to resolve the difficulties. Such principals initially create trustworthy environments, which allow teachers to speak freely about their challenges. Obviously, principal’s long experience as a teacher and school leader impacted him to show understanding for the challenges of his colleagues.

### **Conclusion**

The afore-presented results show that teacher collaborative learning is a crucial component of continuous teacher professional development and principals have a key role in this process. According to teachers’ opinions, principals apply a number of methods to support and facilitate teachers’ participation in collaborative learning activities. Concurrently, principals narrated that they encounter various



challenges in this aspect and have to apply different approaches for maintaining a collaborative learning environment in their schools.

According to teachers' opinions, expressed through an assessment scale, principals apply various approaches for supporting their collaborative learning. They attached high scores to all the items describing the methods applied by principals in this aspect. The vast majority of teachers agreed that principals motivate them to learn and work in teams, they participate in learning activities alongside teachers, encourage them to share the knowledge acquired in professional development programs, create an atmosphere that encourages teachers to develop collaborative activities, create a trusting environment, inspire them to produce materials jointly, encourage them to ask for his advice, and have formed professional communities in the schools.

However, these results should be considered with caution. Firstly, teachers attached high scores almost to all the items included in the assessment scale, irrespective of their demographic characteristics and professional needs. Assumedly, teachers, same as principals, have different experiences in this aspect and could offer more profound and heterogenous answers if they were interviewed. In addition, while the majority of teachers claimed that the principals have supported them to take part in action research, study group, lesson study programs, the principals highlighted only a few methods of teacher collaboration implemented in the schools they lead and did not mention any of the afore-mentioned ones. Also, given that three quarters of the participants have completed only undergraduate studies and around 65 percent of them are 40-60+ year-old, it is possible that they are not really familiar with such collaborative learning

approaches because they were probably not part of the study programs when they completed them.

While the picture obtained through the quantitative data creates an impression that teacher collaborative learning runs smoothly and principals are great supporters of most of the activities, the qualitative findings indicate that this is a complex process that depends on a number of factors. Initially, it should be stressed that principals demonstrated a solid awareness of the importance of teacher collaboration for the school's success, which is very important since such activities depend on principals' beliefs and support (Eraut, 2012). However, the interviews revealed that schools apply only a limited number of teacher collaboration approaches, respectively professional communities, mentorship pairs, and general collaboration. It was understood that the most productive professional communities exist in the schools with large faculties and they are very helpful especially for novice teachers, who can observe experienced colleagues discussing various challenges. The practices applied by the principals in relation to the professional communities are in compliance with the concepts promoted by scholars, who maintain that the success of professional communities depends on the conditions created by the principals (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2007; Stoll, 2010). The research also found that principals make the necessary arrangements for the professional communities to function properly, they attend their meetings, review their reports, and provide feedback, as other scholars found (Brook & Rimm-Kaufman, 2007; Gray, Mitchell & Tarter 2014). However, there are also cases when the principals do not have a full trust in their colleagues and their outputs. These principals may be unaware, but such situations create an extra burden for them and affect school's culture, teachers' relations, and students' learning Taschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015). It also needs to be



noted that the professional communities in the participating schools are not PLCs, but rather collectives committed to achievement of common goals by working together (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

In addition to professional communities, teacher collaboration is applied also through mentoring pairs. Usually, this collaboration derives from free will and is driven by mutual respect. The research found that principals arrange such cooperative pairs by tasking more experienced teachers to assist mainly novice teachers encountering various professional challenges. Such a practice is in line with recommendations of Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), who argued that principals should not only support, but they should also forge collaboration between teachers. However, even though it was highlighted as a major form of collaborative learning, the number of novice teachers involved in this research is rather negligible, which means that there are only a few mentoring pairs in the participating schools. In addition, it seems that they do not monitor the work of these teams and Fullan, Rincon-Gallardo and Hargreaves (2014) stress that even serious investments may result futile if the process is not monitored.

The research also found that creation of a collaborative environment in the school is a rather complex process that requires application of different leadership approaches. Some of principals indicated that collaboration depends to a great extent on teachers' personal factors. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) have cautioned that when teachers are unwilling to cooperate with colleagues and parents, then principals need to undertake measures, otherwise, the process may fail. For instance, one of principals presented two cases when she had to impose her authority in order for the secretary and a substitute teacher to collaborate with other school participants. Hargreaves and

Fullan also posit that judgmental skills are one of the main elements of a principal's professionalism. It is likely that such skills led this principal to apply such an authoritarian approach since she was in school leadership positions for around 20 years. Her case also shows that principals often have to make difficult decisions in order to prevent certain teachers from damaging school's culture and image (Bellamy, Fulmer, Murphy, Muth, 2007; Hord, 1997). However, this is a normal process because, as Moore and Brooks (2000) maintain, "Discussion, dialogue, conflict and reflection are part of the learning process" (p. 11).

On a general note, the research found that the existing collaborative learning opportunities dominating in the participating schools are traditional and deficient. Given the global trends and requirements, the collaborative learning package for Kosovo teachers should be enriched with additional models, such as action research, study groups, visits to other schools, school networks, coaching programs, and other similar alternatives. For a successful implementation, such approaches should be included in Kosovo's educational policies. Furthermore, principals should be trained on their importance and how to implement such programs in their schools. Naturally, such requirements would make principalship even more complex and difficult, but they would help teachers to master new skills and competencies. Also, these alternatives may be successful only if they are designed and implemented by the academia and education professionals, with the support of policy makers and specialized experts.

In addition to introducing new collaborative learning opportunities, principals, teachers, and policy makers have to work on improving and modernizing the ones applied in the schools. Firstly,



efforts have to be made to upgrade professional communities into PLCs where participants do not only collaborate, but they also learn and share professional experiences. It is also the responsibility of the principal to identify successful PLCs in other schools and to arrange joint activities enabling exchange of best practices. Secondly, principals should carefully monitor the activities of mentorship pairs and find ways to assess their results, because it is insufficient only to ask two teachers to work together because novice teachers usually feel insecure to complain about issues that may not work. Thirdly, collaborative culture is very important for the success of a school, but principals should try to maintain it democratically since imposed collaboration is commonly futile. Lastly, given the rapid developments in all the fields, one should not expect that quality of teaching and results of students would improve through traditional programs and approaches, therefore, new ideas and programs are a must in Kosovo's schools.

### **Limitations and Implications for Further Research**

Given that this research depends on quantitative data, one of its limitations could be participant's objectivity. Being an external surveyor, researcher's sole contacts were the 24 principals whom he met for the first time in the introductory meetings. Additionally, questionnaires were left in principals' offices and a considerable number of them were collected from the same offices. Considering that teachers lacked first-hand information about the surveyor, there are no assurances that they have scored the items related to principal's role truthfully. Also, there are no guarantees that teachers thought critically about the respective items when scoring them. Since they refused to receive the questions ahead of the interviews, there are no warranties that principals revealed all the experiences they have faced when trying to support collaborative learning activities.

On the other hand, given that similar studies are almost inexistent in Kosovo, these findings could serve as a roadmap for new studies on teacher collaborative learning and principal's role in it. Interesting results could be gained if the researchers interview principals and teachers and compare their experiences related to the research topic. Furthermore, it would be useful to identify schools with highly teacher collaborative learning cultures and schools that face challenges in this aspect, to explore the role of their principals as well as other factors that support or hinder their cultures and practices.

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