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Attractive Rural Schools in Czechia: Different Patterns of Strategies in the Market

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Abstract

Current policies in education that support school choice can be a threat but also an opportunity for rural schools that are often at risk of closure or amalgamation/consolidation. Studies from Western Europe found two types of schools using the ‘capitals’ of the rural environment in different ways: ‘community’ and ‘magnet’ schools. Our mixed-methods study enriches the discussion on successful rural schools, considering both the school leadership strategies and the situation in the local quasi-market of schools in a post-socialist central European country, Czechia. In the first step, using data from all Czech rural elementary schools, we identified schools that were in demand by local and out-of-catchment-area students. We performed a detailed qualitative analysis of 13 selected case schools and their local quasi-markets in the second step. The usefulness of the analytical distinction between rural schools oriented towards the needs of the local community and those that use rural capital to meet the needs of liberal middle-class families is demonstrated. At the same time, there is a group of rural schools that try to balance the interests of both groups. The article presents vignettes of three such schools. The key feature of these ‘catch-all’ schools is negotiated innovation (i.e., sustainable change communicated with local actors and enabling the coexistence of tradition and innovation). Our study provides a deeper insight into the community/magnet typology, building on the perspective of a different part of Europe. It brings important insights for educational policy and the leadership of rural schools.

Keywords: *rural schools, rurality, school choice, local school market, Czechia, mixed-methods approach*

Introduction

School choice is a phenomenon associated mainly with the urban environment. It may even be seen as a “rural school killer” (Carlson, 2022). Current policies in education that support school choice can be a threat but also an opportunity for rural schools, but there is relatively little knowledge about how rural schools use market mechanisms to maintain their existence and

development. Based on research in Spain and Sweden, Beach and Vigo Arrazola (2020) described two analytical types of rural school responses to quasi-markets in education. In our article, we use this typology for the analysis of rural schooling in Czechia, where there is a post-socialist education system in which a radical decentralisation of the education system took place (Kučerová et al., 2020) and neoliberal market mechanisms were applied in school administration. Based on a mixed-methods analysis of attractive rural schools, we discuss and elaborate on the relevance of the Beach and Vigo Arrazola typology to the Czech educational market.

Review of Literature

Rural schools are permanently under threat of closure or amalgamation/consolidation, which brings risks not only for staff or students (Nitta et al., 2010) but also for wider communities. Schools, therefore, compete for students. The increasing marketisation is connected with other processes taking place in education—the strengthening of the autonomy and profiling of schools, the transition from a hierarchical to a heterarchical organisation with several different actors participating in the provision and management of education, privatisation, and the emergence of the so-called new charity, in which pious goals when establishing new or restructuring existing schools become a tool for building the image of commercial companies or directly a new opportunity for generating profit (Ball, 2008; van Zanten, 2005).

Proponents of market principles in education worldwide rely to varying degrees on two main mechanisms (Hess, 2009)—school choice and greater diversity of school founders.

Strengthening the right of parents to choose from within the existing state/municipal schools forces schools to compete and to behave more like business entities. In this area, the Czech state, during the post-socialist transformation, removed administrative obstacles to choosing a school but also heavily subsidised students' public transport fares, which helped families overcome economic barriers of choice.

Support for non-state founders attracts new actors to the education sector (i.e., new human and financial resources). In Czechia, the policy of the communist regime, which did not allow schools other than those founded and operated by the state, was completely abandoned. The emergence of non-state schools was mainly an urban phenomenon in the first decades of the post-socialist transformation. In recent years private and church primary schools have also appeared in the countryside (Meyer & Kučerová, 2023). In our research, we therefore focus primarily on the first mechanism—the behaviour of competing public (municipal) schools.

Studies of the effects of school choice conducted in a rural or 'non-suburban' environment (Bagley & Hillyard, 2015; Edwards, 2021; Gulosino & Liebert, 2020) are mainly related to the demand side. Generally, pull and push factors involved in family decision-making are often distinguished (Maroulis et al., 2019; Passmore, 2021). In a rural environment, these factors can be understood primarily in relation to commuting students (both incoming to and outgoing from the school/village under study) and then refer either to their original catchment area school (push) or to the school that is currently attended (pull). In Mitchelson et al. (2021), special educators use a different conceptualisation: pull factors 'keep' the students in their current school; push factors drive them out of it. Push and pull factors are closely linked by the distinction between reactive choice, a form of escape for students from an environment perceived as unfavourable, and strategic choice, primarily a search for better education. However, push/pull factors such as reactive and strategic choice are, to some extent, present in every choice.

Few studies have examined how schools respond to parents' preferences and strategies (Potterton et al., 2020; Savage, 2012; van Zanten, 2009). In many countries, decentralisation leads schools to create specific programmes and profiles in the quasi-market conditions. In the Chilean educational market (Chile is a country that has applied a neoliberal model very consistently in education), Zancajo (2020) found five domains of school behaviour: market scanning,

promotional activities such as advertising and public relations, change of school policies and practices, improvement of academic performance and influencing the socio-economic or ethnic composition of a school's student body.

Although we are interested in differences in the behaviour of rural schools, most of them share some structural characteristics (e.g., a lower total number of students and small class groups) and location and external environmental characteristics (locations in a green environment). Also, such schools act within social patterns typical of a rural way of life—for example with close relationships and informal social control (Gristy et al., 2020). Svoboda et al. (2022) described how Czech rural schools use such perceived advantages of rural areas to retain and acquire students. Kučerová et al. (2015) studied the impact of the marketisation of education on rural communities.

Using the critical meta-ethnography of quasi-markets in education in Spain and Sweden, Beach and Vigo Arrazola (2020) concluded that school choice can often lead to the creation of 'magnet' rural schools. These schools take advantage of the increasing mobility of certain groups of students, and more than half of their students come from outside their catchment area (zone). If we only look at the pedagogical processes or the educational results inside the magnet school, these schools can often boast positive signs. However, they do not fulfil other social functions for the rural communities in which they are located. In terms of the existence of schools in other nearby rural communities, they can have a significantly negative impact. The authors also describe the second type, which they call 'community' rural school. Community schools' approach towards local society can be contrasted with that of magnet schools. Community schools recruit mostly local students. Although these schools may not guarantee top academic results, they bring other benefits to students. They are also a significant part of the life of local communities and contribute to their development beyond the increase of real estate prices in the village (Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020).

Context

In Czechia, compulsory education is usually provided in comprehensive elementary schools called 'basic school' (základní škola). Most basic schools are founded and operated by municipalities, and 97% of all comprehensive school students attend municipal schools. The share of private and church basic schools is less than 5%, but several new non-state schools have been established in recent years. Compulsory education lasts nine years, but the grade span of individual schools varies. Two-thirds of municipal basic schools are 'complete' schools (the grade span 1–9, combining both primary and lower secondary school), but rural schools are often 'incomplete' schools (only some or all primary school grades). Since 2017, one year of pre-school (pre-primary) education has been compulsory. It is usually provided in nurseries/kindergartens, which are independent in principle but, in practice, may be connected to a primary school. Although the share of incomplete schools is significant, the number of students in them is small (7%). The so-called multi-year selective grammar schools in towns and cities also provide lower secondary education. Some students also receive compulsory education in schools or classes for children with special educational needs or are home-schooled (Kostelecká et al., 2021); our study did not include these.

After the fall of the communist regime, a strictly planned system of catchment areas (zones) was replaced by an opt-out approach: each child has a guarantee of admission at the comprehensive municipal elementary school assigned to the catchment area of the student's place of permanent residence unless the child's guardian chooses another school (Section 36(5) of Act No. 561/2004). Czech parents increasingly use school choice, which has lost its elite aspect and is no longer limited to the middle class (Straková & Simonová, 2015). It was only in 2023, as a result of a combination of demographic conditions, the influx of war refugees from Ukraine (often families with school-age children), and growing differences between individual schools (in terms of ethnic composition, achievement, and attainment), that the partial collapse of the very liberal system of

compulsory schooling led to a more vocal discussion about stricter regulation of catchment areas (Meyer & Kučerová, 2023).

A relatively dense network of (small) municipalities, many of which maintain their own primary and often also lower (junior) secondary schools, provides for educational options in some rural parts of Czechia. Czech parents primarily choose schools that, in their opinion, can ensure the well-being of their children (Svoboda et al., 2022), a kind environment and friendly teachers or the teachers' willingness and ability to consider students' individual needs are most appreciated (Simonová, 2017). The unavailability of standardised data on the academic performance of schools in Czechia may play a role in the preference for 'soft' characteristics, too, as there is extensive evidence from other educational systems (including large-scale field experiments) that the availability of academic performance data leads families to prefer higher achieving schools (e.g. Houston & Henig, 2023; Valant & Weixler, 2022), although parents usually also consider other school traits and differences in preferences exist between different subgroups (Beuermann et al., 2023; Mandinach et al., 2020).

Research Questions

Our work examines in-demand Czech schools in rural areas within various geographical contexts that feature different development strategies of school leadership. Our research questions include the following:

1. Are there some rural Czech schools that simultaneously have a relatively high proportion of out-of-catchment-area students as well as the high loyalty of local students?
2. What do these rural in-demand schools look like, and what developmental trajectories do they follow?
3. What structural factors and leadership strategies contribute to the attractiveness of these schools for various groups of families?
4. To what extent does the analytical distinction between community and magnet schools (Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020) contribute to the understanding of the strategies of Czech rural schools?

Data and Methods

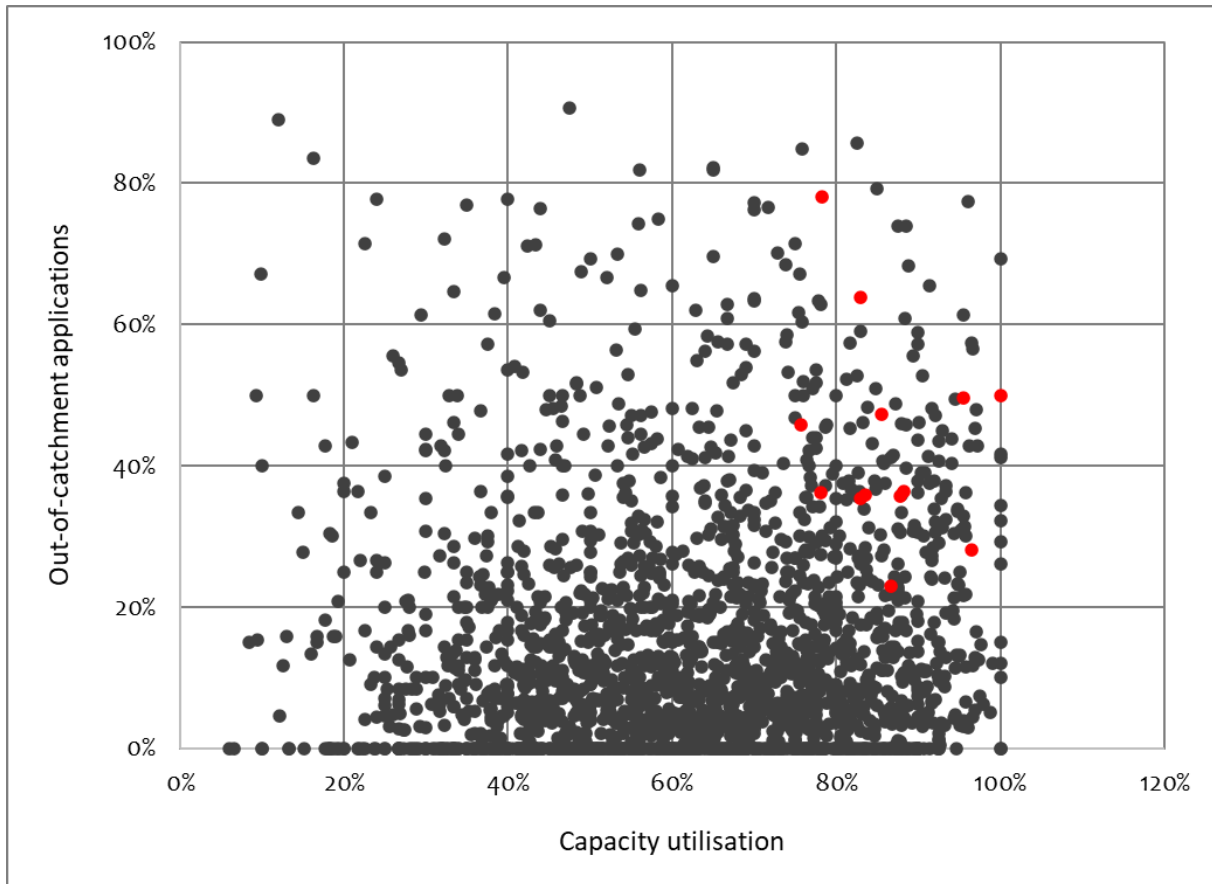
In our study, we defined rural municipalities using a context-oriented approach applying quantitative criteria. A rural municipality has no more than one municipal school within its territory and a population of less than 3000 inhabitants (following the definition of a 'non-urban settlement' in the Czech legislation). A rural school is a school in such a municipality. In 2019, there were 2086 such rural schools in Czechia (about half of all compulsory basic schools).

Selection of Case Schools

A mixed-methods approach was used in the research. We assumed that an in-demand school has a high-capacity utilisation and simultaneously admits many students from beyond its catchment area. Register data on all Czech schools was used; it included school capacity, the total number of students, and information on newly admitted students in the previous three years (broken down by place of residence). First, 192 in-demand rural schools were selected using the following indicators:

- the highest quartile of the school capacity utilisation ratio (over 77.1%)
- the highest quartile of the share of students from outside the catchment area registered for the enrolment process (over 21.9%).

Figure 1: Out-of-catchment-Area Applications in all Czech Rural Schools (N=2086) and Selected Cases (red dots, n=13)



Note: Statistical data about the schools refers to 2019, the year before the changes connected with the COVID-19 pandemic (if not defined otherwise). Students from outside the catchment area = average percentage of students for the school's enrolment process whose permanent address is outside the catchment area (average from the years 2017–2019).

Of these, we excluded the smallest schools, as their data was too strongly influenced by random fluctuation. The second selection step aimed to cover the variability of situations related to the demand for the schools in terms of both their internal characteristics and the external setting and environment. Thus, on the one hand, the socio-geographic data on the municipality and school location was analysed (see Kučerová et al., 2022), and on the other, the schools' online presentations and other documents were considered. To perform an intensive examination of the various situations of in-demand rural schools, we selected 13 case schools covering the set's variability to the greatest possible extent (Figure 1). All the selected schools agreed to participate in the research. However, we found that we had to analyse the primary and lower secondary levels separately. For the same reason, we excluded two primary-only schools from further analysis in this study.

Case Data Collection and Analysis

Since there is a logical trade-off between the share of local students and the share of out-of-catchment-area students in each school, we used a pair of mutually independent characteristics for the case schools. First, we calculated the total share of case school students commuting from other catchment areas. In the previous step of the selection process, we used a slightly different indicator: the share of out-of-catchment-area student applications for Grade 1. Such an indicator was available for all Czech schools but only for the three previous school years. Then, we determined the proportion of all school-age children from a given municipality (catchment area)

attending the case school, i.e., the school in their home municipality (Figure 2). In other words, we were interested in the proportion of local families choosing a non-local school. We did not include students enrolled in selective grammar schools.

Next, the qualitative case data collection included an anonymous non-standardised questionnaire for the parents of the schools' students regarding their school choice preferences and interviews with school principals, Mayors of municipalities, and parents who volunteered to provide their contact details in the questionnaire.

In order to achieve comparability of the cases, we used a pre-structured multiple-case study. Individual cases were anonymised through letter codes and described within the same pre-selected structure. The structure comprised five areas based on five categories identified by Simonová (2017, p. 146) as essential for a school to be assessed as of high quality by Czech parents:

1. the school's position (both geographical location and status)
2. its leadership, instructional resources, and processes
3. after-school care and catering,
4. the quality of the student's life (the physical and social environment and individualisation), and
5. having influence (communication with parents and their participation in school life).

We assumed that if parents seek these characteristics, the schools will address them in their public image as conveyed by the principal, Mayor, and the school's web pages. The most illustrative statements were selected as direct citations to support the descriptions provided in the case vignettes. For the purposes of this study, we present only vignettes illustrating the relationship between the types of magnet and community schools selected from more comprehensive case studies.

Ethics approval was granted by the independent ethics committee of the Faculty of Science at J. E. Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem. In the quantitative part of the study, we worked with data aggregated according to schools and municipalities of residence, which did not contain any student identifiers. The qualitative case data included only adults who provided informed consent. The data was stored and processed following the approved project and standard rules of educational research.

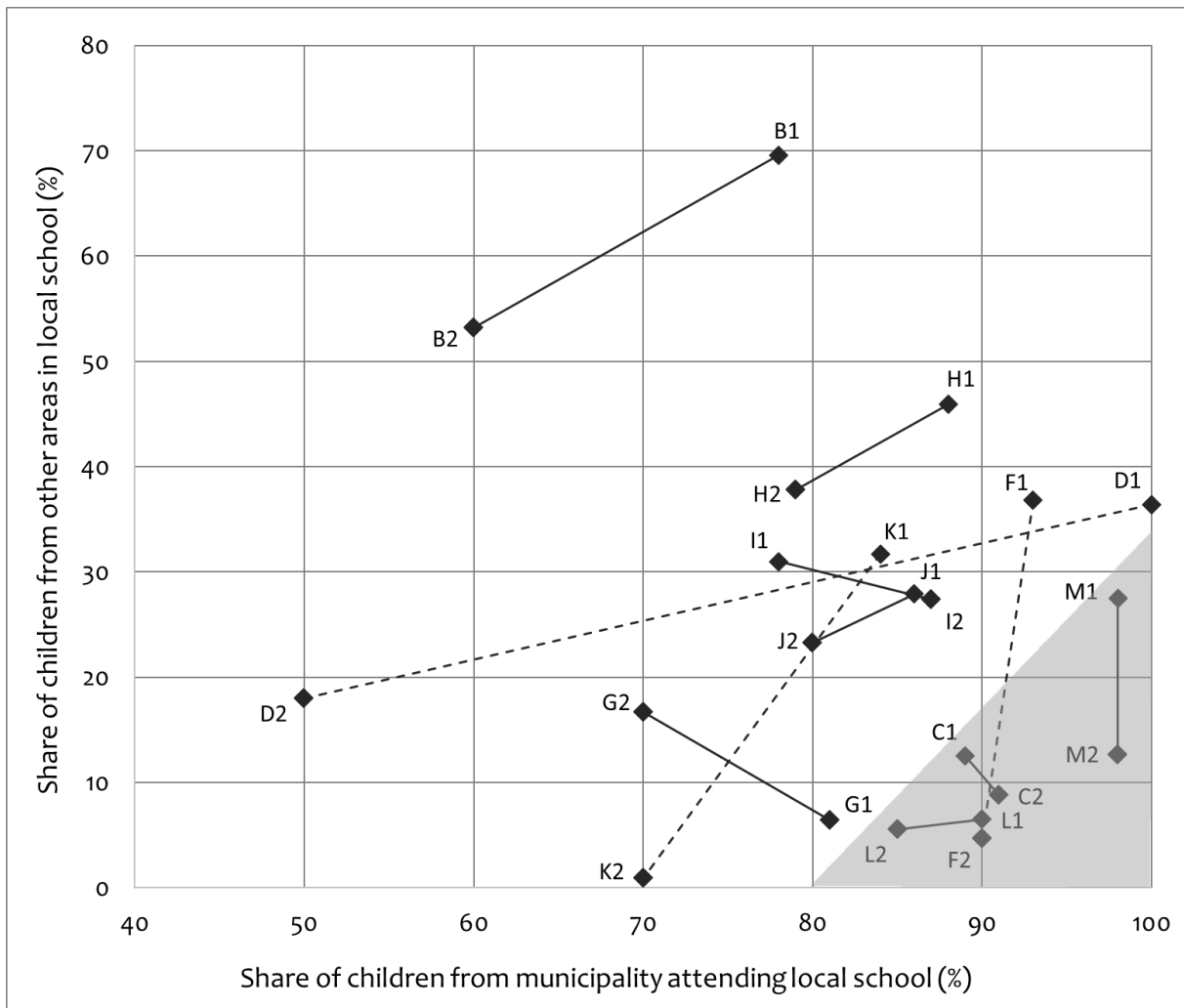
Results

First, we present the quantitative relationships between the case school population and the locals attending surrounding (competing) schools. Then, we qualitatively describe three cases of schools that fall between the poles of community and magnet schools.

In Figure 2, each school is characterised by two points corresponding to the composition of students at primary and lower secondary levels. For three schools, the primary and secondary compositions appear quite different (D, F, K—points connected by a dashed line in Figure 2). We believe that structural reasons play a significant role in family decision-making and possibly also different de facto catchment areas for both levels, not the school leadership policy. We do not consider these three schools below, although they represent an interesting challenge for further analysis.

With most out-of-catchment-area students, the B school has the features of a 'magnet' school. Unlike most schools in our group, it has just average (somewhat worn) premises and equipment.

Figure 2: Quantitative Analysis of Local School Markets (The Connected Pair of Dots Correspond to the Primary and Lower Secondary Level of a Case School)



However, it offers radical innovative and alternative pedagogies emphasising subjective well-being and a maximally individualised approach to students, which appeals to middle-class families from a wide region, including the nearby towns. As the quantitative data shows, it has by far the highest proportion of out-of-catchment-area students among the case schools, but at the same time, many local families enrol their children in other schools. However, the resulting numerical balance is still favourable from the point of view of the Mayor, as the absolute number of out-of-catchment-area students is higher than the number of outgoing locals, and the school is economically sustainable (for more details, see Svoboda et al., 2022).

The other ‘community’ pole is represented by schools that mainly serve the local municipality, which is satisfied with them (the grey triangle in the lower right corner—C, L, M). Only a minimal number of local children go elsewhere, but the school is also attractive to a modest share of out-of-catchment-area students. A more detailed analysis shows that the reason for this attractiveness is sometimes the push factor in the first place: the structural reason is the effort of out-of-catchment-area families to avoid small primary-only schools (parents want to minimise the number of future structural transitions in the educational path), or families are avoiding a school with a high proportion of Roma students (white flight). In the case of push factors, the target school can be a ‘good enough school’ (James & Oplatka, 2015). These schools generally have above-average material conditions and equipment. They are reasonably innovative and keep

communication with parents open, but they do not launch bold pedagogical experiments nor employ alternative approaches, and especially the smaller ones are closely connected with the local community.

However, the remaining four schools in our group (G, H, I, J) lie between the two poles. Three of them that illustrate the different development trajectories of the schools are presented in the following vignettes.

Serving the Community and Beyond (J)

School J is located in a rather economically weak region with a fragmented settlement pattern. The municipality is the centre of its microregion and the seat of a large agricultural company. A key structural advantage is good transport accessibility from the nearby town, both by public transport and now also by private car: *“We have already built a second car park next to the school. Before there was heavy traffic here on the road, yes, and in the middle of the traffic the children were jumping out of cars there.”* (Mayor) Among the structural reasons, the parents also mention the school’s wide grade span (including the availability of nursery classes), minimising the need for transitions, *“So we actually already enrolled our son in the nursery with the understanding that later he will eventually go to [primary] school here.”* (Parent)

Some local parents, as well as the Mayor, value the above-average physical environment of the school the most: *“I appreciate the fact that they actually invest a lot of money, both in the nursery and in the school, we can see that on the premises and I like that”* (Parent), but they are just as satisfied with the way the leadership and staff communicate with parents and students. Various innovative and alternative pedagogic models are used somewhat eclectically, but their implementation is based on consultations with the community. When the school abolished grades in Years 1 and 2, it held a poll that showed that parents preferred traditional grading, and the principal modified the school's policy. Nevertheless, the assessment has not fully returned to the traditional model, and the grades are accompanied by detailed formative feedback to the students (which is not standard in Czech schools). Good relations and mutual trust between the leadership, parents, and students proved to be very important during the COVID-19 pandemic. *“I am really happy with the teachers and the instruction. The distance learning was an acid test, and it went simply flawlessly, [both with teachers and] also with the classmates”* (Parent). An example of the specific advantage of a rural location is the low-cost heating of the school with biogas produced by a local agricultural company, which dramatically reduces the school's operating costs and allows it to invest in the development of the building and equipment.

This provides for a wide range of extracurricular activities that capitalise on the superior premises. Czech schools traditionally start classes at eight in the morning, and compulsory lessons end soon after noon. At the same time, a high proportion of women are employed. That's why after-school care is so important. Families of students who commute by public transit know that their children are in a safe environment because the school is open to all students until late in the afternoon: *“There is no chance for them to wander around. Until their public transport bus leaves, they are here with us.”* (Principal). Parents also positively perceive that leisure activities are comprehensively planned, and the parent does not have to be present or accompany the student when moving from one activity to another. However, the school facilities are also available to the village residents. *“Everything is there, yes, you can come there if you want to play tennis in the afternoon, so you just need to book in advance”* (Mayor). In such a way, the school keeps the social life of the village going as a community centre, making its facilities available to both minors and adults in the afternoon. *“Here, most of the events in the village are related to the school, school prom, academy, fairs, this year a sports day for parents. It’s just [that] the school is trying to give everything back to the village.”* (Principal)

The school is, therefore, very similar to community-oriented schools, but it is also attractive to a share of urban families who want to avoid large and perhaps lower-quality schools in the town:

“I just didn’t want them to go to the [town school].” Parents sometimes define themselves not in relation to the current situation but in relation to their own past experience, which they project onto the town schools (cf. Smith Slámová, 2021): “I actually went to the [town school] and for me that school was big, chaotic.” A rural school with less anonymous interpersonal relationships is valued for its ‘family approach’ and for being an all-day safe space, even for the children who commute.

Community School in the Making (G)

Identifying itself as a ‘modern rural’, School G is located in an ordinary (non-profiled) rural region near a smaller town. Today, the school is housed in a renovated building in a quiet part of the village, off the main thoroughfare. The school premises also include the school arboretum, a geopark, and a sports field.

The turnaround in the history of the school started in 2011 when the school faced a significant decline in its student numbers. Many local children from the catchment area left for other schools. The Mayor recalls: “It was because of local patriotism that I was sorry. When the school is here... why would they go somewhere else? It bothered me terribly.” The school has been perceived as an integral element of the local community: “Almost every parent from the village has gone through this school.” Poor communication between staff, parents, and students and an overall unfavourable school climate, old-fashioned teaching, and inadequate school facilities were identified as the main causes of these departures.

In the first years after taking office, the new school leadership was strongly oriented towards stopping the outflow of locals. The municipality supported plans for the overall redevelopment of the school building and providing a well-equipped learning environment and a safe school climate:

Perfect environs, the new building, an individual approach. It is really a village school, but still seems to have a really high standard of teaching. So it's not just about the new building, albeit it actually improved a lot, made the job easier for the teachers, it's really about the teachers and the quality of the teachers. (Local parent)

The principal has an above-average education (two master's degrees and a PhD.), is involved in municipal politics (e.g., as vice-mayor), his priorities include sustainable rural development (agriculture, hunting). The division of roles between him and his deputy principal works: the principal focuses mainly on improving premises, equipment and in the field of human resources, while his deputy is more focused on instructional leadership. The principal is also an alumnus and perceives the importance of turning the school into a centre of social life in the village: “And I’m glad that the school lives even after the last bell rings.” The range of extracurricular activities organised by both the staff and external partners was gradually expanded. Parents appreciate that village children need not commute to the nearby town to take part in leisure and interest activities and that the school plays a significant role in the community’s social life.

Such changes did not go unnoticed in the surrounding villages or in the nearest town. Gradually, the share of out-of-catchment-area students began to rise. Town parents appreciate the closeness to nature capitalised on by the school’s many activities in the field of environmental education (pull factor) and good public transit connectivity. Also, some out-of-catchment-area families do not perceive their local schools as being of high quality or safe (push factors).

As we mentioned above, the absence of ‘hard’ achievement data is typical for Czech education, so other indicators play a big role. This is also true in this case: “[School leadership] was very successful in renewing and rejuvenating the staff. I think it also affects the parents, it can't be a bad school if young people come to teach here” (Mayor).

The generational change of the staff led to some curriculum innovations, such as the widespread use of ICT in teaching or typing/keyboard skills becoming a compulsory subject. This was met with

disapproval by some local parents and needed to be communicated and negotiated repeatedly. Similarly, trying to create a safer climate with zero tolerance for aggressive behaviour faced resistance as some families considered fighting to be part of the ‘traditional’ way of solving conflicts between boys in the countryside. However, the school leadership does not want to revoke its policy in this area. Thus, even now, some local children enlist in other schools in nearby towns or transfer to them. Compared to the previous case, this school promotes innovation more directly, and its position between the magnet/community poles may evolve further.

A School for two Different Communities (H)

The tension between orientation to the local community and the need to recruit out-of-catchment-area students was solved by School H by establishing two different primary tracks (or streams) with different curricula. The school is located in a village approximately a ten-minute drive from the regional capital of an economically successful region connected to the main transport lines across Czechia. Its pavilion-style building is currently undergoing costly renovation and includes spaces for outdoor learning, a school garden, and a sports field. The actual occupancy is over 90% of its capacity of 490 students. For most local parents, the school is the preferred choice. However, some families choose schools in the nearby city. These parents commute to work in the city and drive their children to urban schools or choose one of the specialised city schools (schools with extra sports, arts, or foreign language classes).

At the same time, the school is in high demand from out-of-catchment-area families, mainly city parents (around 100 students) or families from the surrounding villages and, rarely, also parents living beyond the usual driving distance who are willing to transport their children individually. The key reason is that there are two classes in each primary year, one of them providing an alternative educational programme of Montessori pedagogy.

Progressive and alternative instruction is attractive to parents with higher education from the regional centre, who attach great importance to the choice of school. *“Before my daughter went to first grade, I worried about where my child would go to school for about three years.”* (Parent 1) So (another) community is being created around the school—not local, but urban parents, who support only one part of the school: *“I trusted that at the Montessori primary I would meet people who are similarly minded and who somehow agree with my priorities. We founded a civic association to support the development of the Montessori part of the school.”* (Parent 1)

However, the school strives to improve teaching in other classes as well, e.g., by an emphasis on sustainability and multicultural education or the personal and social growth of students. Continuing professional development of the teaching staff includes networking with other similarly oriented schools on a regional scale. The individual approach to students and parents and the style of communication with them (‘open door policy’, according to the principal), is highly valued. *“When there is a problem, the leadership always gets involved, we always got together—all the teachers from the class, the child, the parents, the leadership, and we always talked about everything. Which I think is excellent.”* (Parent 2) This school, like the previous two cases, also offers a wide range of extracurricular and leisure after-school activities.

Some out-of-catchment-area families even cheat to get a place at this attractive school (a phenomenon called “catchment area/enrolment tourism” in Czechia—Meyer & Kučerová, 2023), but the reputation of the school has become a reason for a genuine migration to the village, too:

Parents told me that they bought a building plot or a house here because they wanted our school [for their children], and they wanted them to be in the catchment area so that they could definitely get in here. It was worth it for them to spend an outrageous amount of money and move here. (Principal).

This is unusual in the context of the low mobility of the population of Czechia—unlike many countries of the Global West (e.g., Butler & van Zanten, 2007).

Discussion

This study investigated whether the concepts of ‘community’ and ‘magnet’ schools (Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020) can be applied in the post-socialist context of central Europe. Our results show that in Czechia, too, the rural school development strategies described in the Western context are at work. An important contribution of our study is that we describe cases of ‘catch-all’ schools that successfully combine both strategies. Indeed, our original procedure for selecting schools was set up to be sensitive to cases different from their typology. We were interested in rural schools that are the preferred choice of the families from the local community and at the same time have out-of-catchment-area students. As a result, with one exception, we deliberately did not study rural ‘magnet’ schools that are mainly oriented towards students from outside the catchment area and have a low proportion of local students. In this study, we also do not deal with successful schools with a high share of the local student population, where the presence of out-of-catchment-area children is sometimes more likely to be due to push factors (dysfunctional schools in nearby municipalities), structural factors (geography), or just serendipity. For the prototypical magnet and community schools, a detailed analysis has been provided elsewhere, as described by Svoboda et al. (2022).

With some simplification, it can be said that some Czech rural schools need to be, and try to be, ‘community’ and ‘magnet’ schools at the same time. The key reason is that many small municipalities try to maintain not only primary but also junior secondary classes in their schools. A secondary school, however, is obviously a much more demanding undertaking. For example, the Czech school law allows multi-grade teaching to be organised at the primary level (Grades 1-5), but not at the junior secondary level (Grades 6-9). In other words, a primary school can be reduced to, for example, a situation where it has just a principal and one or two teachers, but a Czech secondary school cannot legally use a multi-grade model. As one of the Mayors stated, the Czech countryside in the 2010s benefited from European structural policies and decent economic growth, and municipalities often financed large-scale renovations of school buildings and modernisation of their equipment. However, the central government covers the schools’ operating costs based on the number of enrolled students (Shewbridge et al., 2016). In such a case, the rural municipality not only had to ensure the investment in the school building but also often contributed to the operating costs.

In some countries, it is standard to have a separate primary school and then a combined lower and upper secondary school, and elsewhere (the post-Soviet area, northern Europe and in parts of the Mediterranean), combined schools prevail, but in the rural areas there are also many primary-only schools. In Czech conditions, some parents want their child to go to a ‘combined’ (i.e. long grade-span) school from the start, which may discourage them from choosing a small rural school. If a Czech rural school does not want to be disadvantaged in its competition with urban schools, it may be an advantage to have a full grade span, and for that, it often needs out-of-catchment-area students. If such children come to a rural school from urban families, this would not have a direct negative impact on neighbouring municipalities and their schools. However, the high rate of commuters helps some schools maintain a wider grade span (both primary and lower secondary classes), and this can then become a structural advantage compared to municipalities where there is a primary-only or multi-grade school.

As we mentioned above, in Czechia, there is no publicly available and reliable data on the results of students for individual schools, nor is there data on their socio-economic composition. In this situation, many parents (and more so the less educated ones) choose a rural school based on the appearance and equipment of the school buildings (case J). Urban families, on the other hand, may prefer the well-being of their offspring and look for small rural schools and classes for their children (especially if their child is somehow vulnerable). Today, some rural schools can offer both

and more without resorting to aggressive marketing and are indeed being chosen by both local and non-catchment-area parents.

The leadership of many schools must thus walk a tightrope and try to fulfil their ethical obligations towards the local community, gradually innovate education, and simultaneously maximise the number of students in the school (case G). The preferences and values of local and non-catchment-area families can come into conflict. Urban families (or progressive school staff) could try to ‘hijack’ the rural school and steer it according to their values. On the contrary, local parents can inhibit and reject beneficial innovations.

The successful ‘catch-all’ schools we describe above introduced innovations but, at the same time, maintained more traditional approaches. Old and new coexist in them, either as alternatives (traditional and alternative classes) or as complementary approaches (simultaneous formative assessment and traditional marking). Such a school seems to act according to the passage from the Gospel, according to which a good steward “*bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old*” (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Matthew 13:52). Reflexively combining the old and the new is a strategy that has proven itself not only in schooling but also in other domains when striving for sustainable development in rural areas (Zagata et al., 2020). Of course, when introducing changes, schools considered other factors supporting the success and sustainability of innovations—especially open communication with local actors, collaboration within and beyond the school, and sensitivity to resistance (e.g., Prenger et al., 2022; Sánchez & Gutiérrez-Esteban, 2023)

School H illustrates a specific strategy to avoid a trade-off between the demands and values of local and urban students. Like magnet schools, it attracts middle-class families from the nearby city using alternative (Montessori) pedagogy. Thanks to the traditional system of looping (the composition of the classes remains essentially the same throughout the entire period of attendance at the given school), it is easy to maintain one stable group of children in the mainstream pedagogy track and the other in the alternative track within a comprehensive school, and parents can choose (at least theoretically) which approach suits them for their children. There are, de facto, two primary schools within one organisation—one more oriented towards the local community and the other for highly mobile parents from a relatively close university city.

Limitations

In the international literature, rural schools are often defined as being small, both in terms of their enrolment and staff numbers (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2022), but also as multi-grade schools, i.e. schools where there are students of several grades in one class, usually taught by one teacher (Fickermann et al., 1998). We excluded the smallest schools because, for them, the quantitative identifiers used in the selection of schools fluctuated too randomly over time. This left one important group of rural schools out of our study. The students at rural schools were not given a voice in our study, either. We have made certain simplifications in our analysis. In the first step of our analysis, we use the number of students admitted who were labelled as from an out-of-catchment-area by the principal. In the detailed case analysis, we refer to students living in a municipality with at least one concurrent school as an out-of-catchment-area. As a result, we do not yet count students who live in villages where there is no school at all and who are enrolled elsewhere. More precise analysis would require the knowledge of official catchment areas according to municipal ordinances, which do not exist in all cases.

The generalisability of our conclusions may also be limited by the specific structural characteristics of the Czech countryside, where there is a high density of small municipalities (Kučerová et al., 2020). As a result, even in the countryside, the spatial dimensions of many catchment areas and driving distances are relatively small. Only in rare cases do school buses exist in the sense that they are known, for example, from the USA.

Conclusion

Schools in the post-socialist countries of central Europe, which previously had strictly defined catchment areas (zones), now work in what is very much a market environment. The choice of school is increasingly used by rural families as well. The two contrasting types or patterns of the behaviour of rural schools on the educational market proposed by Beach & Vigo Arrazola (2020) prove to be valid for the Czech environment. We suggest the possibility of understanding both types as the poles of a continuum, i.e., as one dimension, which can be captured by the share of out-of-catchment-area students in a rural school, especially students from towns/cities. In our analysis, we added a second dimension expressed by the share of catchment-area students who choose a school other than the local one. It is also necessary to account for the structural factors of both geography and the organisation of education—legislative and budgetary rules for schools. ‘Combined’ Czech rural schools often need to be ‘community’ and ‘magnet’ schools at the same time. In doing this, leaders walk the tightrope between the efforts to innovate instruction (not only to attract the urban students) and meet the—sometimes conservative—expectations of locals. If successful, confronting the values and experiences of different groups of parents and searching for compromises can lead to mutual enrichment and sustainable development of rural schools.

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