

RURAL SCHOOLS: WRINKLERS FOR MAYORS?

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Received 2 October 2008; Accepted 16 December 2008

Abstract: All municipalities in the Czech Republic are obliged to guarantee access to basic education for children eligible for compulsory schooling. To meet this task, most municipalities establish a primary school whose operational and investment costs they cover. Running a school can be very demanding for rural municipalities. The article presents the results of a questionnaire survey which involved founders (mayors) the so-called small schools with composite classes, situated mainly in small rural municipalities. Based on these results examines the main stereotypes associated with the notion of small rural schools. A hypothetical balance between what the municipality must invest and what benefits the school brings is sought.

Key words: rural primary school, small school with composite classes, rural municipality, mayors, founders of the primary schools, reasons for establishing rural schools, costs and benefits of the running small rural primary school

Souhrn: Všechny obce v Česku jsou povinny zajistit přístup k základnímu vzdělání pro děti školou povinné. Aby splnily tento úkol, mnoho obcí zřídilo základní školy, jejichž investiční i provozní náklady hradí. Provozování škol venkovské obce značně zatěžuje. Předložený příspěvek prezentuje výsledky ankety mezi zřizovateli (starosty) tzv. malotřídních škol, nacházejících se převážně v malých venkovských obcích. Na základě těchto výsledků sleduje hlavní stereotypy spojené s pojetím malých venkovských škol. Hledá hypotetickou rovnováhu mezi tím, co obce musí zajistit a užítkem, který školy přinášejí.

Klíčová slova: venkovské základní školy, malotřídní školy, venkovské obce, starostové, zřizovatelé základních škol, důvody pro zřízení venkovských škol, náklady a přínosy provozování malých venkovských základních škol

1. Introduction

All municipalities in the Czech Republic are obliged to guarantee access to basic education for children eligible for compulsory schooling (aged 6-15). To meet this task, municipalities usually establish a basic school whose operational and investment costs they cover. Unless they do so, they have to guarantee these children access to formal schooling in one or another of the nearby villages or towns with a primary school and contribute towards its costs. In this case the municipality is obliged to guarantee traffic access to the school by means of public transport (Act No. 561/2004 Coll.). Economically speaking, running a school can be very demanding for

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rural municipalities while it may, on the other hand, be of key importance for the development of the municipality because the school may play other roles apart from the educational one.

The paper presents partial results of a representative questionnaire survey among respondents from among founders of the so-called small schools with composite classes² in the Czech Republic, which are typically situated in small rural municipalities (i.e. mayors). Based on these results, the text examines some issues associated with the notion of the rural school, the basic one being the question *Which are the reasons leading municipalities to establish their own schools?* The answers to these questions may reflect the values and expectations of different kinds associated with the existence of a village school. The other questions, asked not only by us but by every municipality considering running its own school, concern the costs and benefits of a local school. We asked: *How big a burden to the municipal budget is supporting a local school?*, *How does the school contribute (beyond its principal task, i.e. providing primary education for the population of children) to the life in the municipality, how does it make it richer?* We are thus trying to identify the virtual balance between the costs of the school to the municipality and the benefits it brings – or the expectations of such benefits. We are also concerned with whether the answers to these questions depend on the size of the municipality, the region or other socio-demographic variables. Last but not least, we would like to learn how the number of school children varies in municipalities which found schools with composite classes. Are there any discussions about the importance of existence of these schools in municipalities?

We assume that operating schools with composite classes may be economically demanding, especially for less densely populated municipalities (less than 500 inhabitants) in view of their municipal budget and number of school children. This is probably the turning point whether a school, both building and staff, may be beneficial to a municipality even beyond the scope of its essential function.

2. Methodology of the questionnaire survey and the survey process

To obtain empirical evidence on contemporary small schools with composite classes in the Czech Republic, we conducted a questionnaire survey as a part of the research project supported by the Czech Science Foundation, no. 406/07/0806, called *Small Schools with Composite Classes in the Czech Republic: analysis of the present state and the potential for development* in the spring 2008. A questionnaire developed by the project team³ was distributed by mail to headmasters of small schools with composite classes and representatives of their founders in the end of March 2008. The survey was thus based on differentiation questioning (Ferjenčík, 2000); two mutations of the questionnaire were developed to address the two target groups in a way allowing for a comparison of a part of the data between these two groups.

This paper is based on the answers provided by representatives of school founders only, i.e. mainly mayors⁴. A mailing list including small schools with composite classes in the Czech Republic was used to derive another list including all founders of these schools – 1,368 addresses all together⁵. The questionnaires were distributed by post and 825, i.e. 60.3% of

² Small schools with composite classes are schools where there is not a separate class for each grade, but children from two or more grades are taught collectively in a single class. These were the schools our research project focused primarily on. Due to certain circumstances, which are described below, however our population included responses from the founders of not fully levelled schools, too – schools which do not have all (nine) basic school grades but where children from several grades are not taught in a single class. Considering the fact that distinguishing between not fully levelled schools and small schools with composite classes is crucial mainly with respect to analysis of the nature of pedagogical and managerial work of the school, both types of school will not be distinguished between in this paper and unless this characteristic affects the values of variables under investigation, the term “rural primary schools” will be used.

³ Apart from the author of the paper, the members of the research team included PhDr. Jana Knotová, Ph.D., and Mgr. Lucie Chaloupková, both from the Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno.

⁴ The questionnaire was filled in by 81% of mayors, 4.5% of local administration representatives and 14.5% of other people (deputy mayors, employees of local administration bodies etc.).

⁵ The mailing list including small schools with composite classes was obtained from the Czech Institute for Information on Education. It however turned out to be rather inaccurate since it included basic schools which were not fully levelled but did not have any classes with children from different grades. This is why the list had to be

them, returned. Not all of these schools were located in rural municipalities since exceptionally, small schools with composite classes exist in towns, too. The paper however covers only schools run by rural municipalities – which we defined for our purposes as municipalities with a population of less than 3,000⁶. There were 774 municipalities of this kind in our sample, i.e. 93.8% of all returned questionnaires. The return rate of this subpopulation within the set of all questionnaires distributed among school founders was 56.6%.

3. Reasons for establishing primary schools in villages

The existence of a local primary school may imply various benefits, but investments are needed, too. It is believed that a local school guarantees a “healthy” demographic structure, strengthens the immigration potential of the municipality, that activities of the school contribute to the socio-cultural life of the municipality etc. (Miller, 1995, Moser, 2004, 2005 and others). It is shown that in countries where the intensity of migration is not too high the existence of a school in a municipality is not the decisive factor for migration of local people. The loss of them becomes evident rather in a longer period of time and it is influenced by the loss of job opportunities. (Kvalsund, 2004). The existence of schools may influence not only a demographic structure of villages but also their everyday life. If adults have to commute to work and moreover children have to commute to school, the village becomes depopulated during the day and social life stagnates (Trnková, 2007a). Regarding the fact that commuting to work is in the Czech provinces quite prevalent (Majerová, Nešetřilová, 2002), the risk of daily depopulation of the Czech villages may be quite high if schools are closed.

Furthermore, it is also expected that schools enrich socio-cultural life of villages. (Lyson, 2002, Nösterer, 1990 aj.). In fact, up-to-date empirical Czech evidence of cultural and social activities of schools with composite classes do not exist, therefore it is our interest if this expectation occurs in the Czech provinces and which way the school takes part in a cultural and social life of the village.

There is thus a question which reasons for establishing a local primary school are regarded as the key ones by municipality mayors. Is it about the reasons mentioned above or are there another essential ones? In our questionnaire survey we asked an open question, instructing the respondents to state at least 3 most fundamental reasons that have led them as school founders to establish and run a local school. The distribution of the answers is in table 1.

It is interesting that the way the question was formulated invited mayors to consider a broader context of the reasons for having a local school, which was the intention of the project team. The obligation of the municipality to provide children of school age with access to formal education proved to be less important; other reasons were given more often. In the overall picture, the strongest reason was to prevent children from travelling to school, which reflects health-related, safety-related and developmental psychological considerations towards young children of school age. The top rank hardly seems surprising. What is however more surprising is Rank 2 achieved by the reason labelled Tradition. The interpretation is less evident here. One might suppose that by giving this reason, the mayors wanted to say that the school is a legacy inherited from the previous generations of people living in the village, that the school is a part of the social and cultural life of the municipality, a part of its identity. Although these meanings need not be shared by all respondents, the existence of a shared notion of what the phrase “the tradition of the school” means for village mayors seems to be implied. A more detailed research into this phenomenon might be useful. The third and fourth reasons for school establishment point out the cultural and social role of the school, perceived by the founders as even more important than the educational role. The fifth most frequent reason for establishing a local village school, “building a sense of belonging and an identity”, suggests that the school is perceived as a kind of link among the members of the rural community.

checked and some schools were excluded before the questionnaire was administered – the research population was refined.

⁶ Since different possibilities for defining rural municipalities are available, we will adhere to Czech legislation, which says that municipalities with a population of less than 3,000 cannot get the status of a town.

REASON FOR SCHOOL ESTABLISHMENT	Reason given as first	Reason given as second	Reason given as third	Total	% of the whole	Rank
MUNICIPALITY DEVELOPMENT	36	42	31	109	4.7	6.
KEEP THE POPULATION – FUTURE OF THE MUNICIPALITY	42	34	25	101	4.3	10.
MUNICIPALITY IMAGE	9	14	15	38	1.6	16.
SUPPORT TO YOUNG FAMILIES	25	21	18	64	2.7	13.
SCHOOL IS A PRIORITY	14	6	11	31	1.3	18.
CULTURE LIFE	14	92	77	183	7.9	3.
BELONGING, BUILDING A LOCAL IDENTITY	23	44	50	117	5.0	5.
SERVICE FOR PARENTS	49	39	18	106	4.6	7.
AVAILABILITY OF EDUCATION	63	26	13	102	4.4	9.
SCHOOL GUARANTEES EDUCATION IN MUNICIPALITY	11	10	9	30	1.3	18.
SPECIFICS OF A SMALL SCHOOL WITH COMPOSITE CLASSES	10	52	42	104	4.5	8.
DEMAND IN THE POPULATION, PRESSURE OF PUBLIC OPINION	10	14	10	34	1.5	17.
OBLIGATION OF MUNICIPALITY TO PROVIDE FORMAL SCHOOLING	44	20	5	69	2.9	12.
TRADITION	157	58	47	262	11.3	2.
HIGH NUMBERS OF CHILDREN	27	22	10	59	2.5	15.
TO PREVENT TRAVELLING TO SCHOOL	117	91	57	265	11.4	1.
ECONOMIC REASONS	9	23	31	63	2.7	14.
SCHOOL AS A PART OF THE MUNICIPALITY AND ITS CENTRE	54	28	50	132	5.7	4.
OTHER REASONS	14	37	27	78	3.4	11.
Answer missing	46	101	228	375	16.1	X
Total	774	774	774	2322	99.8	X

Tab 1. Reasons for establishing a local primary school given by mayors (N = 774)

The most frequent reasons for establishing a local school given by representatives of municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants were high numbers of children eligible for compulsory school, building an identity in children, guaranteeing access to school, and the need to maintain the population level (residual frequencies). The need to provide this service for parents of children was more common in municipalities with populations of 501 to 1,000. The reasons for establishing local primary schools in villages were heterogeneous, but the most important ones included reasons of cultural and social nature, combined with another central motivation, to prevent young children from travelling to school. This finding seems to be somewhat surprising because tendencies to consider mainly the economic context of local primary school operation seem to prevail in the general discussion and other functions a local rural school may play tend to go unnoticed. It nevertheless seems that the social and cultural functions of the local rural school are regarded as very important among local administrations and perhaps even among the Czech rural population, not only from the point of view of the existing needs of these municipalities, but also from the historical point of view since these

schools were perceived as a part of the tradition of their respective municipalities by our respondents. We believe that this is the issue which should be covered by a qualitative research since our data cannot bring more detailed evidence.

4. What are the costs and benefits of the school to the municipality?

What is far from clear is how big a financial burden for the municipalities schools are. (Bray, 1988, Bard, Gardener, Wieland, 2005). In view of the fact that municipalities are obliged to provide operating and investment funds for their schools, this may be really very variable through the years. Expenses of municipalities are not usually analysed according to their size, it is rather possible to find cost analysis according to the school size (number of pupils) for individual national policies. These facts show that there is no simple relation between the economy of schools and their size (the bigger school, the more economical). Furthermore, there are differences in personal costs based on current career regulations, transport costs of commuting pupils vary, building operation costs of schools are not easily comparable, etc. (Bray, 1988). Among objective indices there are also subjective ones. A share of school costs in a municipal budget may be assessed as high or relatively low regarding current priorities of municipalities.

To be able to cover financial burden for individual municipalities, we asked our respondents to estimate which percentual share of the municipal budget they spent on the school in the previous year⁷. The schools cost their municipalities 12.6% of their respective budgets on average (standard deviation 10.8). The value of this indicator is loosely related to municipality size (Spearman R = - 0.23; p = 0.00); the share of costs of the school is decreasing with growing populations. Table 2 nevertheless shows that the average share of costs was lower than 10% for municipalities with populations of no less than 2001 people only. The share fluctuates for less populous municipalities.

Generally speaking, the average costs of 12.6% of the municipal budget spent on the operation of and investments into the school is not too high and the value of the standard deviation suggests that only a minority of municipalities spend more than 30% of their budgets on school. The question – beyond the framework of the survey – is how the size of this share is perceived by the representations of the individual municipalities, i.e. whether they regard these costs as low or high.

Population size category	Average costs of school (in % of municipal budget)	N	Standard deviation
0-500	15.99	169	13.01
501-1,000	11.89	415	9.18
1,001-1,500	10.55	103	11.05
1,501-2,000	13.38 ⁸	21	16.59
2,001-2,500	7.06	7	4.57
2,501-3,000	6.00	2	5.65
All categories	12.64	717	10.85

Tab 2. The average costs spent on school by municipalities (by population size)

The school and its employees may enrich the municipality, too, even in economic terms. Our data show that the school buildings are used for various activities in 70% of the municipalities occasionally or regularly, but only in 25% money is charged for the space rental. Municipalities seem not to perceive schools as a potential source of income and tend to use the school

⁷ This is the average value we speak of, no matter that costs of school operation may vary considerably depending on whether investments were made that particular year or not.

⁸ Readers may be puzzled by the data of the average share of financial costs on school for the group of municipalities of 1501-2001, which is higher than for the previous two categories. It may be caused by the structure of a questionnaire return rate, it is also possible that there is an influence of variables independent on the methodology of the research (more frequent investments in schools in last years, availability of respondents' information, etc.)

building in non-commercial ways. Local schools do not therefore bring any direct income to municipalities. The 4 most numerous groups using the space in rural primary schools for their activities are sports clubs (281), organizations providing children's leisure-time activities (224), cultural and hobby associations (198) and local administration authorities (147).

Apart from the potential of the school building itself, there is also the potential represented by school employees. We have therefore asked the mayors whether school employees provide any services beyond the scope of their profession. This turned out to be relatively common. School employees most often help with building the image of the municipality (321), organize social events (241), cook lunches for community members (228) and lead leisure-time activities (204). The respondents were selecting from among a range of activities which was used by us to develop a "school-for-municipality" index, ranging between 0 and 9. The average value of the index was 2.25. Although it cannot be said that the schools are overactive in this respect, they indeed are engaged in activities for the benefit of the municipality. It seems to be a virtually universal phenomenon, irrespective of the size of the municipality, the geographical location, level of school equipment or number of school employees. It may be the case that the relatively low degree of involvement of school employees in work for the municipality has to do with an absence of resources to pay for this work. School employees are therefore much more involved in work with children. The most frequent activities are leading leisure-time activities (658), organizing visits to cultural events (412), organizing one-off events such as fancy-dress balls (353) or organizing travel (303). The mean value of the school-for-children index – which can range between 0 and 6 – was 2.54. Like with the previous index, no correlation between the index and the above variables has been found.

Schools do not just create costs for municipalities; they help to make the leisure time of both children and adults spent in richer and better ways, help to build the images of their municipalities and also provide some services for local community members. Their economic potential, on the other hand, remains largely unused, which may be partly due to legislation defining the legal relations between the municipality and school with respect to the use of the school building and limiting supplementary economic activities of schools. This circumstance may hinder the development of further functions of rural schools, which are sometimes regarded as community centres (Trnková, 2007).

5. Are there people to run schools for?

The 1990s in the Czech Republic were a period of a demographic revolution. The big drop in birth rate became evident in schools especially towards the end of the decade, both in cities and in rural areas. A number of villages were forced to close down their small primary schools while other villages decided to raise the subsidies so that their schools could go on. The municipalities included in our population have experienced debates about a closedown (29%); there are schools where such a debate is going on even now (3%). During the 5 recent years there has been an increase in birth rate again and primary schools may hope to be able to use all of their capacity in the future. Since we believe sufficient number of children eligible for primary school attendance to be one of the primary factors affecting decisions about the existence of local schools in municipalities, we wanted to know whether this circumstance is or is not a source of worries for the mayors. They assessed the development of the number of pupils in school as follows:

Trend in number of pupils	Frequency	Relative frequency
MARKED DOWNWARDS TREND	36	4.65
DOWNWARDS TREND	175	22.61
FLUCTUATION	218	28.16
UPWARDS TREND	133	17.18
MARKED UPWARDS TREND	16	2.06
STABLE NUMBERS	179	23.13
Answer missing	17	2.19

Tab 3. Trends in numbers of pupils in last three years from perspective of school founders

Over half of the mayors reported stable or fluctuating numbers of pupils; one fourth reported a downwards trend. The size of the municipality (population) does not affect the assessment of the trend in pupil numbers in any significant ways. No statistical correlation between the geographical location of the school and the trend in pupil number development has been found and the geographical location does not seem to affect the reasons leading municipalities to establish schools either.

Two thirds of the mayors did not expect any substantial change in pupil numbers; 18% expected school expansion (e.g. by adding another class), 6% expected a class to be cancelled and 5% were not sure the school would not have to close down as a whole (this mostly concerned municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants).

It therefore seems that the number of pupils is but one factor affecting decisions about the existence and operation of village schools; it may nevertheless become the key factor should the numbers of pupils drop below a critical limit.

6. Final discussion

Let us now return to the question asked in the title of the paper and look which problems a rural school may pose for the mayors of the villages.

The analysis of our data has shown that the expectations of school founders towards local rural schools are relatively varied, reflecting mostly considerations towards children (preventing them from travelling to school) and expectations which may be referred to as socio-cultural, seeming to be connected to the historical development of small schools with composite classes in rural areas in the Czech Republic. The school is certainly perceived as a part of the legacy of the municipality, as a cultural agent, and a subject at the heart of the municipality contributing to building a sense of belonging and local identity. Only secondary to all of the above, school founders regard schools as a tool enhancing municipality development or a service for parents, as their obligation to provide children with access to schooling etc. The question arises: Which is, in fact, the position of present-day primary schools in villages in the context of other institutions contributing to citizenship comfort?

The economic aspect of school operation does not seem to be a major problem for most rural municipalities. School founders spend an average of 12.6% of the municipality budget on school. Even this share may nevertheless be perceived as relatively high. This can, among other things, be connected with the real operational and investment needs of the individual municipalities, with how successful they are in securing money from other sources etc. Our survey has however clearly shown that schools are not a prominent source of local income and that school buildings are often rented for free to various local subjects. This hypothetical loss is, on the other hand, compensated by the relatively frequent involvement of school employees for the benefit of children and partly for the benefit of other members of the local community, too. This involvement consists mainly in organizing leisure-time activities for children – often on a regular basis, supplemented with one-off events. The question is whether teachers work in this way for free or whether school founders acknowledge their work by financial reward.

Finally, we were concerned with whether the development of numbers of pupils as such is or is not a source of problems for the mayors. It turned out that most of them recorded a stabilization in pupil numbers and two thirds expected no radical change in this respect. Two thirds of the mayors also claimed that their municipalities had experienced no debate about potential school closedown yet. It thus seems that this circumstance is likely to cause problems in municipalities with the smallest populations.

We believe the existence of a rural school means not only wrinkles for the mayors, but on the contrary, a considerable boost to the municipality's social and cultural life. If these costs and benefits are to be compared, it has to be borne in mind that the comparison concerns factors of varied nature – mostly economic, social and cultural; it will also be necessary not to forget that they will not be distributed on the two sides of the balance evenly. The individual municipalities seem to be aware of this; what is much less clear is whether this is true also of the higher levels of Czech educational or regional policies or the “big” national politics.

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