

Abstract: Public elementary schools in rural municipalities represent key institutional amenities for the communities they serve, and their administrations are part of the broader municipal political structure. This article focuses on the views of Czech mayors regarding the role schools play for municipalities and a consideration of how school operation practice can produce positive outcomes for school and community. Schools have proven to be important local institutions with many social functions for which municipalities have various support tools and strategies. We argue that the good functioning of the school strongly depends on the local political representation's support. The rural school incorporates both an investment in the physical environment of the municipality and a strategic investment in the human capital for the future generations, and sustainable development of municipalities.

Key words: rural school; school in demand; public amenities; elementary school operators; mayors' views; local school policy; Czechia

Souhrn: Veřejné základní školy ve venkovských obcích jsou jedním z klíčových prvků občanské vybavenosti a jejich správa je součástí komunální politiky. Článek se zaměřuje na názory českých starostů na roli školy pro obec a na druhé straně na úvahu, jak může být škola ze strany svého zřizovatele podpořena, aby byla úspěšná. Školy se ukázaly být důležitými místními institucemi s mnoha společenskými funkcemi, pro jejichž podporu mají obecní zastupitelstva různé nástroje a strategie. Zároveň argumentujeme, že dobré fungování školy je silně závislé na podpoře místní politické reprezentace. Venkovská škola v sobě symbolicky propojuje investice do fyzického prostředí obce se strategickou investicí do lidského kapitálu, budoucí generace a rozvoje udržitelnosti obce.

Klíčová slova: venkovská škola; žádaná škola; občanská vybavenost; zřizovatelé základních škol; názory starostů; lokální školská politika; Česko

Highlights

- rural amenities as an issue of politics
- continuing social significance of an elementary school for a rural municipality
- local political representations' support tools for the schools in demand
- good functioning of the school depends on the stakeholders' mutual support and trust
- school incorporates investments in the physical environment and in the human capital

1. Introduction

We often hear in Czechia that the church, the school, and the pub are the three crucial social institutions and the prominent buildings of the rural settlement in terms of urbanism (Zemánek, 2003). In variations, this statement also appears in other (economically developed) countries (Bell, Sigsworth, 1987). However, the rural space has undergone several significant changes since the introduction (mostly in the eighteenth century) of compulsory school attendance and the associated process of urbanisation during the nineteenth century, when most inhabitants and economic activities had physically moved to towns (Solstad, Andrews, 2020). Rural areas saw substantial decreases in population due to emigration and changes in demographic behaviour (cf. Hampl, 2005; Slee, Miller, 2015). The outflow of inhabitants resulted in the lower number of users of services in the countryside from the mid-twentieth century. Nevertheless, the growing mobility, intensified through the expansion of information technologies in the past decades, means that having all the services in the place of residence is not necessary (Milbourne, Kitchen, 2014). Conversely – inhabitants of towns and cities again have conditions to shift the place of

their residence or even workplace (including increased normalization of remote workplaces / home-office mode) to attractive rural areas. Thus, after the end of direct urbanisation, the rural space in the economically developed countries witnessed indirect urbanisation, i.e., the country life has been affected by urban cultural models and economic activities. Although the urban-rural duality continues in many respects, we can say the two spaces have become strongly closer to each other and influence each other (Woods, 2010). In such conditions, could the presence of an elementary school in rural municipality still have, in any sense, significant role and its crucial position from the viewpoint of the locals?

Our research focused on the environment in Czechia, on the perception of the role of rural public elementary schools by their operators, i.e., primarily by municipal mayors (local leaders) in Czechia's case. We deliberately reduced the research sample to the rural schools that seem to be preferred by parents because such schools can be expected to be required and appreciated by the elected local community representatives who have their governing role in relation to the school. However, it should be stressed that these may not be schools with a high academic performance, as they are usually perceived to be high-priority and highly ranked schools in Western countries, and especially in urban areas (Butler, van Zanten, 2007). As several surveys in Czechia have reported, a school is preferred by parents for a variety of reasons. For example, because its kind environment, the teachers' willingness and ability to consider students' individual needs or simply because it is well connected by transport (cf. Simonová, 2017). Therefore, these may be relatively "ordinary" schools in terms of academic achievement (see Svoboda et al., 2022). Still, this one-sided selection for the schools in-demand must be considered when interpreting the results.

During semi-structured interviews with mayors of selected municipalities, we looked for answers to the following questions within three interrelated thematic sections: (1) What does the school's presence bring to people in the municipality? Is the school a vital part of the municipality? (2) What advantages and disadvantages does the school's operation have for the municipality? (3) Do the local political representatives strive for the school's existence in the municipality? What means can be used to support the school's operation?

The findings are expected to contribute to a debate on the perception of the significance and functions of some public amenities' elements in rural areas and examine the conditions of the current rural schooling. The gained insights can be used in international comparisons.

2. Public amenities in the rural space; their social and institutional aspects

The research into public amenities and their significance for rural development have long been important issues for rural geography, rural sociology, and regional development studies (e.g., Dostál, Markusse, 1989; Elshof, Haartsen, Mulder, 2015; Bernard, Joukl, Vítková, 2022), and, of course, also for the planning practice and spatial development strategies. These topics also resonate in studies in political sciences, which work with local leadership and local governance concepts (e.g., Burns, Hambleton, Hoggett, 1994), i.e., with the political control of a territory, with the definition of targets and visions, which should also include the issues related to public amenities. On the other hand, this theme is reflected in the research of the electorate, who, by their acts – civil activities, opinions, and election behaviour, express their (dis)satisfaction with the public amenities' conditions in the given territory (e.g., Agnew, 1996; Mikešová, 2019).

As Bernard, Joukl, Vítková (2021, p. 23) say: "It may seem even surprising how intensively the public amenities' level in small municipalities is associated with the issue of the quality of life in the countryside." And how often the claims regarding the declined services in small municipalities are reflected in the statements made by the local political representatives in rural municipalities and political parties as arguments to win stronger support for the countryside. Likewise, the scope and quality of the provided services are monitored and reflected by the inhabitants of small municipalities (Schafft, 2016). If there is a risk of adverse development trends or extreme events, such as closing a publicly provided service, people often apply various forms of civic participation and activate the local opposition, e.g., organise

protests, petitions, open letters to political representatives, etc. (Kłoczko-Gajewska, 2020; Ribchester, Edwards, 1998).

The reasons for the proclamations regarding the need for just public amenities include not only the assurance that no one is unjustly excluded from the possibility to use services at a standard that is common in given society (Bernard, Joukl, Vítková, 2021). In the context of these proclamations, three essential social and institutional aspects of public amenities must be reflected:

(1) For most of the twentieth century, the justice of amenities' distribution was regarded by the so-called distributive paradigm (see e.g., Cuervo, 2016). As just distribution was considered such that the services were located evenly and uniformly within the territory according to normative criteria and in relation to the spatial pattern of users. That means that all inhabitants have equal or similar access to services defined as "basic". From the last decades of the twentieth century in the economically developed countries, the concept of justice gradually included also non-material aspects of the quality of life and the possible diversity of interests of territorial or social groups. In relation to rural space, the perceived standards of living and life through the prism of urbanormativity (Thomas et al., 2011) or metrocentrism (Roberts, Green, 2013; Beach et al., 2019) is especially subject of criticism. The critics argue that attitudes and relationships functioning in urban society are the primary ones applied in territorial management and decision-making. Consequently, some specifics of functioning of local communities in rural areas do not have to be considered or are even deliberately overlooked. For instance, services in the countryside are more often provided on the basis of volunteering, neighbours' help, the grey economy, and oral agreements than on a purely commercial or formal basis (Dostál, Markusse, 1989). Therefore, the expected "efficiency" of amenities measured by metropolitan area criteria is not often achieved (Haartsen, Gieling, 2021).

(2) However, in this respect, other social and institutional dimensions of public amenities arise. In rural settlements, specifically, the elements of public amenities also have other meanings than only to satisfy the needs connected to their primary functions (Lyson, 2002). Christiaanse and Haartsen (2017) differentiate several meanings of local services based on many previous theories of regional identities and the person-to-place relationship. In addition to the functional meaning, which provides inhabitants with the respective service availability in the place of their residence, amenities also have a local economic meaning, e.g., in the form of job opportunities. Yet, they also have substantial social meaning, serving as a place for encountering other people, communicating and building social bonds (cf. Kłoczko-Gajewska, 2020; Bernard, Joukl, Vítková, 2022), and other value-based and affective meanings, which Christiaanse and Haartsen (2017) describe as symbolic and emotional. Thus, the elements of amenities are part of the personal experiences of individuals and collective consciousness and are endowed with symbolic meanings of historical continuity, identity, municipality's viability and promise for its future (Witten et al., 2001; Lyson, 2002).

(3) Finally, this all leads to the third aspect for highlighting the significance of public amenities for the quality of life in rural contexts. It is based on what the local community and society generally see as the desirable and desired development, as a successful municipality that is appreciated as a liveable place. As mentioned above, for most of the twentieth century, rural development concepts corresponded to the principles of the distributive paradigm of the material quality of life. They emphasised the need to have public amenities standards in the countryside that are close to the situation in towns and cities and reinforced the rural space's perception as something having a 'deficit' and requiring help and assistance (Cuervo, 2016). In the post-socialist space, these tendencies further intensified in the 1990s in the so-called corrective societal transformation (Hampl, 2005), striving to 'remove the old burdens' and insufficient investments from the central planning periods (Perlín, Šimčíková, 2008). Consequently, this approach resulted in the social discourse that successful municipalities grow in population and offer many services (Bernard, Joukl, Vítková, 2022). Second, the consequences included the development priority of many mayors of smaller Czech municipalities to 'strive for subsidies' for almost any activity, which is a good advert for a 'good' mayor (Čermák, Mikešová, 2018).

At the end of the twentieth century, rural support gradually expanded to include 'soft', post-material aspects of the development, activating human resources and endogenous growth (Hruška, 2014). These

tendencies are, after all, also apparent in the shifted ideology of the local leadership, from local government to local governance, i.e., emphasising the comprehensive discussion and participation of local actors in the governance enabled by the local political representation (Bäck, Heinelt, Magnier, eds., 2006; Jahnke, 2019). Although the positive relationship of inhabitants to the municipality, trust, relations encouraging informal activities and ability to solve problems together (Majerová, 2005; Čermák, Mikešová, 2018) are described as the crucial conditions for development in Czechia for several decades, and public amenities do not play such a significant role for the actual satisfaction with the life in the municipality (Bernard, Joukl, Vítková, 2022), the inertia of the emphasis of (not only local) politicians on investments in the physical environment and amenities still remains apparent (Chromý et al., 2011). One of the possible explanations is the more explicit relation to the electorate because tangible investments make the 'consequences of a successful development' more visible and more easily provable than intangible and strategic investments (Perlín, Šimčíková, 2008).

3. Research into the operation of elementary schools in rural municipalities

Schools presented key public amenities in rural contexts. From the viewpoint of spatial organisation and hierarchy of services, there are most frequently the lowest levels of education in the countryside – i.e., the pre-primary level (kindergartens) and elementary schools, often only the initial years of the compulsory school education (Solstad, Andrews, 2020; Trnková, Knotová, Chaloupková, 2010). A question begs to be asked: What school can be described as 'rural' because there is no universal definition of a rural school even in the international environment, and it depends on the overall context of the school system's organisation in the given territory (Gristy, Hargreaves, Kučerová, eds., 2020). Thus, the population size of the settlement, where the school is located, or the size of the school as such are the most frequent normative criteria for defining a rural school.

The rural school phenomenon started to be increasingly accentuated with the critical paradigm trends in social sciences in the 1970s as a reaction to the too technical planning of the school network and, particularly, to the then mass closures of small schools in the countryside and the following debate about the development problems in peripheral areas (e.g., Bell, Sigsworth, 1987; Dostál, Markusse, 1989; Meusburger, 1980). A rural school began to be positioned as the opposite of an urban school, both through socially constructed images of its supporters and opponents (Solstad, Andrews, 2020). The growing influence of marketisation in the school system in the 1980s and other processes (e.g., decentralisation of the school system's management, possibility of parental free school choice – Altrichter, Heinrich, Soukup-Altrichter, 2014; Holloway, Pimlot-Wilson, 2012) changed the group of those who can co-shape the spatial pattern of the school system.

Yet, systematic research on the functioning of rural elementary schools has not been possible until recently – and in many respects, not even today (Fargas-Malet, Bagley, 2022; Gristy, Hargreaves, Kučerová, eds., 2020). Research on rural schools represents a much smaller proportion of studies than urban topics (Kučerová, Trnková, 2020). Typically, the issue of rural schools is an object of interest in a broad spectrum of the so-called educational sciences, which by their nature deal primarily with the internal educational environment of schools themselves and rural teachers' tasks (Corbett, Gereluk, eds., 2020) but traditionally also with school-community relations (Karlberg-Granlund, 2019; Dvořák, Starý, Urbánek, 2015). The wider context and external relations of schools are more often of interest in sociology and geography of education or economics (Kovács, 2012; Slee, Miller, 2015; Kučerová et al., 2020; Roberts, Fuqua, eds., 2021). A real fraction of studies deals with education policy and governance in small municipalities and the management of rural schooling (Jahnke, 2019; Ribchester, Edwards, 1998; Tantarimäki, Töhrönen, 2020; Tieken, 2014). As to the topic of the importance of the rural school, more attention has recently been paid to its position in the education system (Cuervo, 2016; Solstad, Andrews, 2020), the image and perception of its characteristics (Kłoczko-Gajewska, 2020; Bernard, Joukl, Vítková, 2021; resp. 2022).

As for the existing studies focused on the attitudes of the local political representation toward local schools and issues connected with the school's operation, the survey conducted by Trnková (2009) among mayors of Czech municipalities having a small rural school with grade span (also, Trnková, Knotová,

Chaloupková, 2010) and the abovementioned sociological, economic, and regionally developmental surveys of the school's significance as an element in public amenities and aspect of the quality of life (Kłoczko-Gajewska, 2020; Bernard, Joukl, Vítková, 2021; resp. 2022) are closest to our research.

4. Methodology and context

The presented study is part of a broader research objective dedicated to rural schools preferred by parents (in demand) (e.g., see Svoboda et al., 2022 and Dvořák et al., 2023). This particular study focuses on the opinions of mayors on the significance of the schools they operate within the municipality and also on the reflection of the options for supporting the school by the municipality as its operator.

In Czechia, municipalities incorporate and operate about 90% of public elementary schools (Meyer, Kučerová, 2023). The role of the municipality in relation to the school is broadly similar to that of the school district in other countries (Anglo-Saxon ones in particular) or its equivalents of various types of networks, such as charter management organizations (CMOs) and education management organizations (EMOs) in the United States. We therefore refer to the Czech municipalities by the term "operator", indicating the legal entity that is the "governing body" of the school (cf. e.g., Dallavis, Berends, 2023). Hence, the mayor does not represent the function of the school principal, that is another natural person. But mayor is a key actor in the municipality, especially in a small rural one, influencing local school policy, deciding within the municipal council about the school's existence or non-existence in the community, and appointing the principal.

The schools in municipalities with a population of up to 3,000 inhabitants (as defined by Act No. 128/2000 Sb.) are regarded as "rural" here. There is no blanket and systematic evaluation of elementary schools in Czechia to define the 'in demand' schools (or high-priority schools), which could indicate their prestige. Subjective preferences for individual schools can be partly established at a microregional level by surveying inhabitants, which, obviously, cannot be applied at the nationwide level. That is why we applied substitute indicators and performed a two-steps selection of the research sample.

In the first step, we assumed that a high-demand school is fully utilised to its stated maximum capacity, accepts local students and is also sought after by students outside the catchment area. We used the register of all Czech schools maintained by the Ministry of Education as a source. We used data on the stated capacity, the total number of students, and information about the newly enrolled students in the past three years, categorised by the place (i.e., municipality) of residence. Based on these indicators, we selected 192 schools, which had 1) the highest quartile of the school capacity utilisation ratio and 2) the highest quartile of the share of students from outside the catchment area registered for the enrolment process. We excluded the smallest schools from them (those under fifty students) because their data was too affected by the random fluctuation of low student numbers.

The second selection step aimed to cover the variability of situations connected with the demand for schools both in terms of internal characteristics and the external environment. Thus, on the one hand, we analysed the socio-geographic data about the municipality and the school's location (for more detail see Kučerová et al., 2022), and on the other hand, we considered the schools' web presentations and other documents. A three-level scale (or, in some cases, a four-level scale) was created for each characteristic under assessment. Each school received a score based on this scale and the fulfilled characteristics. This approach resulted in eight different combinations of the school's position in terms of the school's internal characteristics and five groups in terms of external settings. To be able to look into various situations related to rural school operations, we chose 13 case study schools, which cover the set's variability to the maximum possible extent. All selected schools and their operators agreed with their participation in the research.

Mayors' statements were acquired during controlled semi-structured interviews that took between 45 and 90 minutes. The interviews were most often conducted by a couple of researchers from the team between the summers of 2021 and 2022. They were continuously evaluated for the extent to which they reflected and saturated the research questions. During that time, other interviews were conducted with

school principals and selected students' parents for the wider research project purposes, but these are not used in this study. In total, 47 interviews were conducted, 13 of which were with mayors. For simplification and also to preserve the anonymity of the respondents, we use the term "mayor" or "school operator" to refer to a person in this position, regardless of his or her gender, although we are aware of a certain unfairness of this step. Nevertheless, the sample of respondents was strongly dominated by men of middle-aged or at the end of their career. Some were re-elected for several terms, but even those with shorter time in office had been members of a municipal council before or had at least spent a significant part of their lives in the municipality. To anonymise schools/municipalities, we used substitute non-associative denominations with alphabetical letters from A to M. The interview covered three parts: 1) the school's significance for the municipality's inhabitants, 2) the opportunities and risks of operating a school for the operator, and 3) school-supporting tools and local school policies. These three parts were derived from three thematic sections of research questions listed in the introduction. A thematic analysis of interview data obtained from the 13 communities was performed (Braun, Clarke, 2012). In the first stage, we read the transcripts and coded them with initial codes that were later refined. The thematic analysis does not replace the detailed open coding of the data; it builds upon it. So, in the second phase, we proceeded to the processes of categorisation and conceptualisation to identify patterns and themes (Saldaña, 2016). The structure of the themes was discussed among the authors. The method of thematic analysis that was used made it possible to identify some key issues and patterns described below.

Finally, it is important to remember that the research results may be distorted due to the research taking place predominantly on a sample of municipalities with schools in demand. Although it helped cover a broad spectrum of existing meanings and functions of a school, the findings cannot serve as exhaustive evidence about less successful or even unsuccessful schools, where some identified meanings and functions of a school might be absent. As a result, local inhabitants and stakeholders can perceive such schools in a different role, even as dispensable institutions. On the other hand, many arguments for a school's existence in the municipality seem to be of a general and transferrable nature, as shown by the research results from a larger sample of rural elementary schools, e.g., Trnková, 2009; Bernard, Joukl, Vítková, 2022; Slee, Miller, 2015; Kłoczko-Gajewska, 2020; Lyson 2002). Moreover, some of the case study schools should be perceived as relatively "ordinary" in the context of Czechia. Since, as already stated in the introduction, these are not purely high-priority elite schools.

5. Role and operation of rural schools through the prism of their operators

5.1 What does the school's existence bring to people in the municipality

Each interview with the municipality's mayor made it apparent from the very beginning that the school was a vital institution for them, particularly if it was highly demanded by the parents.

From the point of the school's primary educational function, the respondents saw it as a big advantage that inhabitants do not have to travel long distances to school and that students are educated in an environment that they know. Other research projects looking into rural amenities focusing on schools also express efforts to protect at least the youngest children from commuting daily (e.g., Trnková, 2009). The most common arguments include saving time and costs on commuting, an easier balance between the care for children and the parent's job (cf. Bernard, Joukl, Vítková, 2022), and the security aspect and social control: *"Well, the village school allows you to control the negative drug dealing and all that crime and this stuff. After all, you can't control kids in cities; they're on the bus and go here and there. Here, you know exactly where to look when your child leaves the school."* (Mayor B).

In terms of the educational content (curriculum), schools in Czechia can, in some respects, adapt their school education programme to regional conditions and specifics, which is why some respondents highlighted the school's activities or the so-called place-based curriculum in relation to the formation of the regional identity (cf. Svoboda et al. 2022), both in terms of historical consciousness and acquiring traditions and as part of the civic engagement and enhancing a more confidential relationship to the municipality through shared activities: *"I took, just as a matter of interest, a publication made by our school with the help of the district museum. At that time, there was a project in education, and it was*

a pity that the outputs would remain only in that project. So, it became a kind of, I would say, local history book, and there is some basic information about each village." (Mayor C); *"There are also workshops, beautifully equipped, and we would like to offer something, not only for the children, under the supervision of the locals, to renew the craftsmanship here."* (Mayor G); *"We seek to engage the kids in organising various events. For example, we also want them to have a say about some things. For instance, we are about to approve the budget, and I inform them about some essentials."* (Mayor I).

These activities go beyond the educational function towards the cultural and social function, supporting the community life in a rural municipality. *"We have more exhibitions during the year; there is always a vernissage, some concerts, lectures, workshops for the broad public ... and lectures for the seniors conducted by a former teacher."* (Mayor C); *"When we held St. Nicholas Day [a Czech tradition with costumes and masks using the motives of Christian heaven and hell – authors' note] on the school's site, a mayor from the neighbouring spa town, where they have a monstrous St. Nicholas show, comes to me and says, 'we organise it for hundreds of thousands and have no chance that it looks like this'. I tell him: 'It costs us nothing as a municipality. We have like 50 volunteers here who can run around it all day long in their free time'."* (Mayor I).

There is a common denominator of such events: They successfully connect the community across generations or help integrate newcomers into the community more easily (cf. Bernard, Joukl, Vítková, 2022). *"We had a 100th anniversary here. They at school prepared a small coffee shop, like it was 100 years ago. There was an exhibition; they had costumes, and the ninth graders also served visitors and baked something. The old residents liked it a lot, they took a walk down their memory lane, and so on (...) They can engage the locals; they have interest in the school."* (Mayor B). *"When they have these garden parties, the grandmas and grandpas go there, have a beer and see their grandchildren who just performs, and they talk. And they say, 'It's good we're here like this.' When I do something just for the elderly, I get only 20 people to come and I'm almost talking them into it; get them a meal, it's free. No, they'd rather sit at home in front of their TV. (...) But if the kids are performing, they'll bring their grandmas and grandpas with them!"* (Mayor E).

The school's social function is also related to the use of the material and technical facilities of the school building, its surrounding parcels, adjacent sports fields, etc., for the activities of clubs, sports clubs and other interest groups or the public life of the municipality. As Bernard, Joukl, Vítková, (2022) pointed out, in some settlements, the school gym or outdoor grounds are the only spaces large enough and equipped with technical infrastructure for many people to meet. The cooperation between the school and the municipality then brings not only broader possibilities for the organisation of the public event itself but also arguments for renovation or investment from various types of project support: *"It is now in the conditions (...) if you want subsidies, you must guarantee that it will be accessible to the locals. (...) And when we need to use the school premises, the principal is always in favour. So, we organise, for example, children's days there, because it's enclosed, the playground, and the kids can go there. (...) So we lend them tables, tents, and the municipal bounce house, so they can have fun."* (Mayor F). The symbiosis of the school with the municipality on a social and cultural level is also reflected in the perception of the school as a kind of 'shop window' of the municipality: *"When we need children, look, when something happens ... We're here in all the competitions like the Village of the Year and the like. Well, you don't even need to teach that at school 'cause everybody must participate, see."* (Mayor J).

As some rural elementary schools offer their premises and attractive leisure time activities comparable to larger schools in cities, it ensures that people are present in the municipality all day round and supports the municipality's 'liveability', as also mentioned by Bernard, Joukl, Vítková, (2022). *"For example, I can see it in other villages that do not have a school. People live there but only get there to get some sleep while here, so to speak; after all, it's a little bit alive. (...) I lead a young firefighters' club, so I also have children from the school there. I think I would not have any if they did not come here but to the city to spend their leisure and I wouldn't see them. There would be no option to work with them."* (Mayor B).

Concerning population, it is often argued that the presence of an elementary school provides the municipality with a migratory attraction (Elshof, Haartsen, Mulder, 2015). A few respondents also mentioned the not-so-common practice in Czechia that some parents even purchased property in

the village because of the school. The exclusivity of the in-demand schools is a key aspect in these cases. In general, the effect of the school's presence on population development is less unambiguous (Barakat, 2015). Bernard, Joukl, Vítková (2022) even pointed out a certain paradox: In villages with a school, the majority of residents consider it difficult to dispense with, but only 17% of inhabitants of municipalities without an elementary school consider its absence a major shortcoming. In the municipalities with an active and in-demand school that we studied, it has always been considered an important part of the community, and it did not even depend on the population size or geographical location of the municipality. In various modifications, the symbolism mentioned in the introduction of this article appears in the respondents' statements: *"You know, the school, the municipal hall, the church, the pub, these are the basic four legs on which every small village like this stands."* (Mayor M). The relationship between the absence/existence of a school and the perceived quality of life in the village and its migratory attraction is perhaps best summed up by Mayor K's statement: *"It's just that a village, which has a school, actually has a bonus."*

5.2 School's operation by the operator

Regarding municipal policy, the school's effectiveness is a crucial topic associated with the local school. Most usually, local actors perceive it subjectively, i.e., whether the school operation's advantages prevail over disadvantages, and measure it through the share in the municipal budget invested in the school (cf. Slee, Miller, 2015). Based on the results of a broader survey among mayors of municipalities with rural schools, Trnková (2009) states that these municipalities annually spend about 12.5% of their budget on the school's operation and related investments on average. This share grows to around 30% with the lowering population size of the municipality. This data corresponded to the situation before the regulated tax revenues of municipalities (Act No. 243/2000 Sb.), which introduced direct financial support to the municipalities establishing a public elementary school in their territory. Nonetheless, the given shares also correspond to the current statements of our respondents. *"If you take the direct funds transferred to the elementary school's separate account, it is about 10% of the budget. Still, you need to add at least twice as high a sum, which is related to construction maintenance, more significant investments, and area and sports grounds maintenance, see. And you need to buy new things. So, it definitely is an important part of the budget. In some years, it is 30% or even 35%. For example, when we operated a school bus at the municipality's expense."* (Mayor C). Although the abovementioned regulation of tax revenues of the municipalities operating a school aims to help (naturally, to a certain extent) them by making the municipalities the school's operator and providing them with tax advantages due to higher costs compared to the municipalities without a school, this approach creates a double-edged situation. It is because the school also renders services to individuals who are not locals while the representatives of the municipalities from which they commute do not have any duty to contribute to the costs associated with 'their' students because they get this money from the national level. *"The catchment area contract is made only with Municipality X; others didn't want it. Because if they have a contract with us, they really must give some money for the small repairs. So, Municipality X gives us CZK 250,000 a year. The other municipalities give us some funds, too, but it is less, like for equipment. (...) But the school principal negotiates it with the municipalities on his own. For example, Municipality Y gave him money for one electronic board. (...) Well, and they also had bad floors there. So, Municipality X paid for the lino. [Interviewer: Isn't it a nationwide duty to provide a financial contribution if municipalities make a catchment area contract with you?] No, no. We, as the municipal representatives, determined it."* (Mayor F). So, it highly depends on the relationships between the mayors in the region and the way they agree: *"For example, when we do something uncommon, I ask the neighbouring mayors if they wouldn't make a contribution. Well, and they always laugh at me."* (Mayor K). Many residents then say that the local budget is not sufficiently used for the *"locals"*. (Mayor L).

The agenda related to the school's operation and development is challenging regarding material and human resources – the competent municipal and school management. The related activities include maintaining and investing in the school's physical environment, planning and fulfilling development visions, and integrating the school agenda into other public administration activities. That is why mayors of municipalities with in-demand schools constantly consider its opportunities and risks. Still, if other

significant circumstances, i.e., the steady reduction in the number of students or an adverse staffing situation at school, do not come into play, the representatives of rural municipalities do not generally decide to terminate the school's operation for financial reasons, as shown by the results of other surveys, e.g., Bernard, Joukl, Vítková (2022). Moreover, the representatives of the municipalities with in-demand schools mostly unanimously support school-related expenses and extensive investments: *"I've told the councillors that if we get to it [extensive school reconstruction– authors' note], it would be loads of work and they'd face various swears and jeers. They would simply need to suffer for three years. (...) So, we agreed on it; we chose it; we said to each other that no one would declaim it. We would either take it unanimously or leave it."* (Mayor G). This statement indicates that some members of the general public sometimes reproach councillors that they too much and one-sidedly invest in a single public segment. Mayor B adds: *"If we quit the repairs at that time (...), we would apparently have a better tractor or something like that. (...) Now, with the benefit of hindsight, (...) they give us a hard time: 'So, you've repaired the school and should now also get water supply here' (...)"*. However, as Mayor B points out, the presence of the school and the related activities and its everyday operations also entails other investments in the public space that would otherwise not take place: *"So, we say that it's nice to have a church and a beautiful school here; but the space in front of the school is just an asphalt area worth nothing. So, it made us change the space in front of the school into something safe. We'll have pavements, a bus stop, waiting areas, a pedestrian crossing, and other separate facilities for the kids with benches, where they can sit, and it will be safe, without cars (...) And we've also managed to save some money and buy the pub on the other side. So, we plan to change that little house into a library and flats for the teachers. And we want to change the pub into a bistro because we've found out that the mums come here, and the kids play, and the mums stand there for half an hour and talk. So, we say it's a potential. And we can also see the kids who go to the shop to buy some crisps and energy drinks and this stuff if they do not like lunch in the school canteen. So now, they would come to the bistro to get some kind of healthier food and be a bit under control. (...) Well, but you need to wrap it all a bit up that it is not only for the school and that it is also for the village."*

5.3 Operator's tools for school support

Financial support provided by the municipalities to their schools, within or beyond their duties, is one of many ways of providing help to the local school. Municipal councils have various strategies and support options based on the broader regional context of individual municipalities. Using the respondents' statements, we categorised this support into tangible and intangible.

Tangible support does not mean only direct financial compensation for expenses within the school's budget. According to the above statements, it includes many direct and indirect investments in the school's physical environment (buildings, its material equipment), investments in the appearance and equipment of the adjacent (school) land, sports grounds and public space. Most often, it is funded from the municipality's budget and the financial means acquired from various grants and subsidies. Also, it is necessary to add the financing of bank loans from the municipal budget, which must often be agreed upon for such extensive investments. Even the actual implementation of the renovation or modernisation of the school-related real property includes the construction process and other actions, often conducted by the municipality or in cooperation with the school. So, besides the capital, the municipality also provides the school with the necessary know-how and human resources. For instance, they need an architectonic study, buy land, prepare project applications, communicate the process to the public, coordinate construction work, and deal with many entities. It is immensely beneficial if students can be involved in the project because the investment concerns them. In addition to making such activities attractive and acquiring many skills, they also feel some kind of belonging to the school. *"We've managed to find good architects who engaged the school parliament. And I've really found that time and spent two whole days on it. And the kids did an incredible work. They were divided into groups and motivated so they understood what to do. And each group drew a different part of the school. They collected it and the kids presented it to the other groups and received comments. And, basically, 80% of what the kids brought forward was prepared for the project."* (Mayor I).

The municipality's tangible support can also include the provision of municipal flats for (mainly starting) teachers. Offering affordable housing can be a significant benefit offered by school principals to acquire high-quality staff, especially in peripheral areas. *"If you want a pharmacy in the countryside, you must pay for it. I must bring the pharmacist from Ukraine, train her, give her a flat, and teach her Czech. You simply need to do all the papers. (...) You must pay for any service. (...) We weren't afraid of giving young people a chance, and so we give flats to the teachers. (...) That's our daily life; we don't want these people to leave."* (Mayor M).

The council's tangible assistance to the school or directly to the students and parents, respectively, also includes purchasing teaching aids or providing a financial contribution to such aids and similar reliefs: *"To support the first graders in their school attendance here, we pay their lunches from our budget. They get it for free all year round. The whole first year. Also, we give CZK 1,000 to each child at the beginning of the school year to buy the basic aids – exercise books and the like."* (Mayor D). The municipality also often co-finances, on its own or through grant support, the students' activities beyond the standard lessons or even out-of-school activities: *"We have a floorball project now, so the whole school plays floorball. We have a tournament with the Poles five times a year. The kids really like it because first, they go on a trip and are motivated to train, and it is also a cultural event."* (Mayor I). *"I know that some parents really have money problems. So, I give a donation to the fifth graders so their teacher can take them on a trip. I want them to have good thoughts about us when they leave us. (...) The teacher organising it takes them to paintball, a jumping arena and the like."* (Mayor A).

Still, intangible support is equally important for the school. Consequently, no tangible support is attainable without intangible support, i.e., without good relationships between the school and its operator. The municipal council can, by its powers, affect the school climate and its broader initial position by appointing and removing the school principal. Although many municipal councils do not intervene directly in the process of education or personnel issues in the teachers' team and leave them up to the principal, most of our respondents admit that, from time to time, they feel the need to give advice or feel some responsibility as the school's operator: *"I think that in the moment of truth, if we have to step in, whether in personnel or social issues, the municipality will always have the final say as, I would put it, a 'backup source.'" [laughing]* (Mayor H).

"It always depends on the relationships between the mayor and the school principal – if it, so to say, is not going smoothly, or if it works. (...) If the mayor is grudging, then he says, 'well, I'll give you money for electricity and pay it'. But then, as regards the contribution to various school issues and items, he says, 'I won't give you a million. I'll give you only 200 grand and you get hold of the rest of it'. This can get the principal on his back." (Mayor B). Mayor G adds other consequences: *"The school's operator and management in the neighbouring village had problems, which, naturally, spill over to the parents because we are in a small village, and everyone knows everything. So, the parents say – what does the school look like if they fight each other. Then, we'd better sign up our kids to another school."*

Mayor A characterises his role in supporting the school's operation as follows: *"My role is to care for the building. It should look nice; it shouldn't be dangerous; it should represent the school, see. It is because even though the principal does her best, people come in front of the school and think, 'Jesus, old windows, old facade, everything's knocked inside'; and that's bad. So, to put it simply, I do care for it. (...) And my second role is to communicate with the school principal and back her, give her support and support the school's development as much as possible, so it is not the constant target for the parents."* So, as for intangible support, mayors most frequently see their position as a roofing role in communicating with parents and the public. Likewise, they mediate actions and negotiations with other stakeholders, e.g., public transport operators, so commuting students get fair access to the school. *"If we closed the school, it would reduce bus operations for other people, too. We have many buses here due to the school."* (Mayor D). However, the negotiations were not always successful, so several respondents were considering operating their own school bus at some point. *"The municipality used its own money to acquire a bus with 25 seats, and we ran a regular bus line as a public carrier for about 25 years. It collected and transported kids to the kindergarten and the elementary school. (...) After two years in operation, the line was integrated into public transport, and we also drew support from the regional authority for the so-called*

non-revenue operation, as all other carriers in the public sector. Well, and the region chose a single carrier for the entire region in a tender two years ago, and the winner took over all the lines, including ours. Otherwise, we would continue to operate it.” (Mayor C).

The regional school policy also involves communication with other schools, including kindergartens and secondary schools. *“At the moment, we deal with the outflow of children after the elementary school. For example, there are four secondary schools in a nearby town, and then we find out that maybe 55% of the students go out of the region anyway, see. So, we're trying to brainwash those kids to stay here in the region because if they leave at the age of 13, their rate of returning to the region is very small. The secondary technical school has a principal with really big ambitions. They invested a lot, and so we regularly send kids there to play with robots and stuff like that.” (Mayor I).*

There is also a special category of negotiations between the school's operator and councils of the neighbouring municipalities that concern the school market, e.g., the form of the school's catchment areas, enrolling non-catchment students, etc. Their results are then reflected in the local school's utilisation rate and the related problems, whether the capacity is not full or hovering around the maximum limits. Our sample shows, similarly to the previous surveys (e.g., Kučerová, Bláha, Pavlasová 2015), that the competition for students is perceived rather negatively in the rural space – except for the competition against the city or town, which rural mayors generally oppose, and there are widespread efforts to reach a solution, both formally and informally. *“Actually, before that, there was an outflow of kids. So, the school principal went around ten villages here. They only had school up to the 5th grade, and then from the 6th grade on, they went to the city. So, the principal drove there, arranged it with the mayor, and the kids actually came here, not to the city.” (Mayor F); “Even though they come here from the surrounding non-catchment municipalities, it's not drastic numbers. So, if we were to lose those students, I would in fact wish it on those mayors. If there was a slight outflow – the principal would probably disagree if he heard it – I wouldn't mind it. I sympathise with the operators. So, I'd even wish it on them if some of the kids left and went back to their catchment schools.” (Mayor G). Other problems exist in the wider urban hinterland, where there is strong population pressure on rural schools: *“The mayors are pushing as hard as they can for us to get as much capacity as possible with the school renovation. They don't quite understand why some of our councillors are so cautious. But I must back them up because that caution is justified. On the other hand, I think cancelling all the catchment municipalities is a kind of extreme approach as if the school was just ours. It's always been a catchment area, but we used to have 300, 350 kids, now it's almost 500!” (Mayor L).**

Intangible support through communication also includes spreading the school's good name and promoting it, which the mayors do on various occasions. *“For example, when we have the enrolment for the first grade, I address other mayors who do not have a school electronically, in person, or over the phone, and I tell them about our school. We also have some information materials for them to know how it works.” (Mayor C). “The parents, of course, often commute to work and do not have much time to sit down. I think the presentation is vital these days. It means that I open Facebook and can see that our school keeps posting information there. And there are also schools (...) that do not have anything on Facebook. So, I automatically think, ‘nothing is going on there’ without even noticing that they also have clubs and an individual approach.” (Mayor A).*

To sum up, the key is, firstly, the discretion of support from a limited offer of resources and, secondly, the willingness to listen to each other on both sides of stakeholders: *“That means we seek to be forthcoming towards the school and provide financial and material support within our compass. There are some requirements, and there is some reality. And as soon as the municipality or the school asks for something, we really don't say, ‘Jeez, they want something again’. No. ‘They want money? What do they want it for? Does that make sense?’” (Mayor G).*

6. Discussion and concluding comments

Despite the ongoing economic and social-cultural approximation of the rural and urban environments, one of the research questions of this article can be answered that elementary school represents a fairly

essential local institution for rural municipalities in Czechia. Our survey among the operators of in-demand rural schools repeatedly came up with statements that the school is a pillar (one of the pillars) of the municipality's vitality and existence of the local community. A similar key role is attributed to the local school by many international studies on rural schooling (e.g., see Bell, Sigsworth, 1987; Gristy, Hargreaves, Kučerová, eds., 2020; Lyson, 2002). The respondents also provided information about the activities, functions, and services with which the school fulfils this metaphor:

First and foremost, the school provides accessible education to local children without the need to commute and deal with the related difficulties and possible socially perceived risks. It represents the municipality's cultural centre, and the people associated with the school are often organisers of sports and cultural events and initiate the citizens' engagement (fulfilling the municipality's development vision), combined with the club activities or the local community in general, which, at least in some regions and in some respects, still operates on the basis of neighbourly relationships as compared to the urban environment (cf. Majerová, 2005; Christiaanse, Haartsen, 2017; Roberts, Fuqua, eds., 2021).

Such events generally create links between generations, various social groups and actors (see also Witten et al., 2001; Bernard, Joukl, Vítková, 2022), encourage interest in the school and, indirectly, in the events in the municipality in those citizens who do not have children in the local school. That is why the school's operator deliberately opens up and promotes the school and the related activities among the public, thus creating a part of the local identity and collective consciousness. In this context, we can also see some specific relationships within the rural community (in contrast to the towns and cities) when the councillors personally and financially support the school beyond their duties to keep the positive climate in the municipality. In many cases, the political representation aims to keep the school graduates in relationship with the school and locality; to ensure that they will find it worth staying in the region or linked to the region in the future and thus prevent further depopulation of peripheral areas (cf. Schafft, 2016). After all, some principals of our case study schools came from the region, and one of them was even a graduate from the given school. The school's existence in the municipality gives the municipality a certain degree of exclusiveness, a higher hierarchical or symbolic position compared to the municipalities without a school when negotiating with other entities and service providers.

The school, the adjacent sports grounds, and other public areas are also a physical environment and technical facilities whose maintenance and development help cultivate the environment in the municipality. They are used both by the local residents and visitors for educational and sport, community, cultural and, consequently, economic purposes, thus making the municipality a liveable space (Chromý et al., 2011; Kłoczko-Gajewska, 2020). In return for all this, of course, a considerable price is paid in terms of the municipal budget's contribution to the school's operation.

Local councils have a broad scale of strategies and tools to support the school's operation, starting with the funds based on the rules for tax revenues of municipalities to other direct and indirect investments in the school's real property and equipment, provision of other municipal assets (e.g., flats for teachers), material arrangements of social events organised by the school and financial reliefs for students (cf. Cuervo, 2016). Intangible assistance includes the operator's moral support for principals when pursuing the school's vision or negotiations with the councillors from the neighbouring villages and other entities as regards the regional school policy.

The local political representatives mostly have unanimous views of operating a school – the school is supported by the local council as a whole (cf. Trnková, Knotová, Chaloupková, 2010; Ribchester, Edwards, 1998). However, they might have (significantly) different opinions on the school's vision and character, the scope of investments and support of out-of-school activities.

It can most likely be regarded as one of the reasons for the substantial differentiation in the demand for individual schools and in their success. And there is also a limit in implementing some of our findings in the settings of municipalities with less successful schools. Not each management of the municipality, or school has the necessary starting conditions and skills or the courage to embark on changing the dissatisfactory yet beaten status (cf. Beach et al., 2019; Dvořák et al., 2023 or see Dvořák, Starý, Urbánek, 2015 – who in their longitudinal study examined the management and transformation of several

schools in geographically different regions in Czechia). Due to the municipalities' limited financial resources and the demanding character of the operation of school, the school's support can often take place only to the detriment of other development plans in the municipality. This may not meet with the understanding of all residents, i.e., part of the electorate, seen through the prism of municipal politics.

We argue that the good functioning of the school, its preference by parents (compliance with expectations), the support of the local community, the strategic plans of the local government and the actor's reactions to the conditions of the broad environment work together like interconnecting vessels (cf. Svoboda et al., 2022; Dvořák et al., 2023; Kłoczko-Gajewska, 2020). This is illustrated e.g., by Jahnke (2019, p. 29), where one of his case study regions has built its local marketing vision and the local trademark on a successful local education system, evolving additional dimensions of social participation. At the same time, the success of one region or one municipality causes imbalances in the interconnected system – for example, through the deformation of catchment areas (Meyer, Kučerová, 2023). Thus, on the one hand, local political representation seeks to provide the level of public amenities and support the community services that they or the electorate consider to be necessary. On the other hand, higher political authorities seek to equilibrate the education system as a whole in accordance with discourses of efficiency and quality, which may be defined and perceived very differently (Roberts, Fuqua, eds., 2021). The larger the gap between these two levels, then, the more political and social pressure the school and its operator find themselves under. A specificity of the Czech educational as well as administrative system is its enormous fragmentation: Less than 4,000 elementary schools are distributed in 6.2 thousand municipalities in a country of 10 million inhabitants. Municipal councils have a large degree of autonomy in decision-making and controlling competences, however they are dependent on the financial support, visions and legislative frameworks of the national education policy (Kučerová et al., 2020).

An elementary school enjoys, to a certain extent, a unique position in comparison with other elements of public amenities in a rural municipality. It combines, on the one side, the mayor's emphasis on the need for investing in the municipality's physical environment, i.e., the desired advert for a good local council for the electorate. On the other side, it is a relatively long-term, strategic, intangible investment in the human capital for the future generations and sustainable development of municipalities. A well-functioning school could also be an argument for recognition and appreciation of rural schools in a metrocentric society (Svoboda et al., 2022, Tieken 2014; Cuervo, 2016).

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