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How rural schools in Czechia respond to parental preferences: Different approaches to students' well-being

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Abstract: Czech parents place particular emphasis on ensuring the overall quality of life of their child when choosing a school. Our study shows how rural state schools understand this demand. A mixed approach was used in our research. In the first step, administrative data from all schools in municipalities with a population of up to 3,000 was used to shortlist 91 schools in demand by both catchment and non-catchment families. In the second step, socio-geographic data on type of municipality, online presentations, and other documents of the shortlisted schools were analysed. In the last step, case studies of 13 schools were prepared on the basis of parent surveys and interviews with stakeholders. We present case studies of three schools with different explicitly expressed approaches to satisfying parental preferences through a specific mix of care for well-being and valued characteristics of the rural environment. Our study adds to the existing literature on school choice and school leadership by describing specific developmental and/or marketing strategies of rural schools based on the real or perceived characteristics of the countryside.

Key words: in-demand schools, rural schools, rurality, well-being, school choice

Introduction

Czech parents, following the lifting of restrictions concerning strictly de-

fined catchment areas at the end of the 20th century, have freedom of school choice and are increasingly using it. Thus, school choice in Czechia is losing its elite aspect limited to the higher socioeconomic position of a group of inhabitants (Straková & Simonová, 2015).

Under open enrolment, the parents' choice of school is factually limited only by individual families' options, not by the law. However, it still applies that the tendency towards choosing a school grows with the parents' level of education and the size of the settlement, i.e. also with the possibility of making easier choices from several schools (Straková & Simonová, 2015; Prokop & Dvořák, 2019).

The current research focused on school choice in Czechia has two specific limitations: (1) it was carried out exclusively in urban areas and in municipalities with more than only one school. Hence, such locations provide better conditions for making a choice. Therefore, our study focused on schools that draw a high proportion of students from outside their official catchment areas despite being located in rural municipalities; (2) the school choice mechanisms have been well described from the demand perspective, i.e. from that of parents (e.g. Straková & Simonová, 2015; Simonová, 2017; Smith Slámová, 2021). However, we see a significant gap in research on the 'supply' aspect, i.e. schools' response to parental preferences and their behaviour strategy in the educational quasi-market (see e.g. Kučerová, Bláha & Pavlasová, 2015).

Our research identifies different strategies employed by successful rural schools in response to the parental demand for well-being. We aim to enrich the existing knowledge about school choice and the concept of students' well-being by the presentation of in-demand schools' strategies relating to their location in a rural space. Considering this objective, we have articulated the following research questions: What conceptualisations of well-being do the schools in the rural space use? How do they use their rural context to position themselves in the school quasi-market?

Review of Literature

In traditional Western countries parents primarily choose schools with a record of high academic performance (Butler & van Zanten, 2007; Tam, 2002). In contrast, well-being seems to be a dominant factor for a significant number of Czech parents. In other words, they most appreciate a kind environment and friendly teachers or the teachers' willingness and ability to

consider students' individual needs (Simonová, 2017). Parents' preferences when choosing a school are not homogeneous even in Western countries.

Broader expectations associated with schooling have recently been expressed as an emphasis on the child's well-being (Hargreaves, Shirley, 2018; OECD, 2019). The perceived increase in mental disorders, especially among young people, contributes to the interest in this concept. However, well-being is still not understood uniformly even in normative documents or in research discourses (Ben-Arieh, Casas, Korbin & Frønes, 2014; Frugoli, Almeida, Agostinho, Giannetti & Huisingh, 2015). In addition, even individual recent approaches understand well-being as a complex multidimensional phenomenon (Burke, Minton, 2019), conceptualised, on the one hand, as the absence of physical or mental diseases and the positive subjective experience of students in the present moment, but on the other hand, as their full development and benefits from a longer-term perspective. The emphasis placed on different aspects of well-being can also be influenced by culture and the level of development of the region (Rodríguez-Rosa, Gallego-Álvarez, Vicente-Galindo & Galindo-Villardón, 2017). In the Czech context, for historical reasons, the "health-promoting school programmes" of the World Health Organization had a great influence on school practice in this area (Havlínová, 1998), as well as "quality of life" research focused especially on (chronically) ill children (Mareš, 2010).

The approaches also differ in whether they emphasise the well-being of the individual, the (local) community, or even an even larger whole – up to the global context. Consequently, there is a group of families who are aware of the possible contradiction between social responsibility and the choice of schools with "elite" status (Potterton, Edwards, Yoon & Powers, 2020) and some parents consciously avoid schools that emphasise their reputation or performance/achievement orientation. In this way, families can consciously or unconsciously strengthen their image as liberal urbanites (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014) or protect their children from stress and peer pressure in an "elitist" school (Ramos Lobato, Bernelius & Kosunen, 2018). Such parents may prefer genuine intellectual development over instrumental outcomes of schooling, or focus on "expressive values centred on the intrinsically pleasant aspects of education and school life" (Raveaud & van Zanten, 2007, p. 110). Thus, well-being pursued by school choice (or by a deliberate refusal to choose other than the local school) may be motivated by a different mix of materialist or post-materialist values (Gottau, 2020) related to individual biophysical benefits of the child or broader social benefits in the present or future (Smith Slámová, 2021).

Supply side of school choice

Studies conducted in a rural or "non-suburban" environment (Bagley & Hillyard, 2015; Edwards, 2021; Gulosino &Liebert, 2020) are mainly related to the demand side. Considerably fewer studies have looked at how schools respond to parents' behaviour and strategies (Potterton, Edwards, Yoon & Powers, 2020; Savage, 2012; van Zanten, 2009).

At the macro level, open school enrolment leads in some cases to the exclusion of problem students from in-demand schools and to increasing segregation and educational inequalities (Gulosino, Yoon, 2020; Jennings, 2010; Nekorjak, Souralová &Vomastková, 2011; Yoon, Grima, Barrett DeWiele & Skelton, 2022). In this study, we are more interested in the micro-perspective, i.e. the strategies of individual schools.

Influenced by the idea of neoliberally controlled schooling, many countries decentralised some powers falling within educational policies at the end of the 20th century. Hence, schools started creating their own specific marketing programmes and profiles in the quasi-market conditions, also applying some arguments used by supporters of rural schools (Ribchester & Edwards, 1999). The findings so far show that schools often do not behave as expected by proponents of market reforms (Dvořák, Starý & Urbánek, 2015; Jennings, 2010; Lubienski, 2006). Zancajo (2020) studied the responses of schools in the Chilean educational market (Chile is considered a country that – at least until recently – applied a neoliberal model very consistently in education). In this, he classifies five types or domains of behaviour: (1) market scanning as collection of information on both parents' and students' demand, as well as on the other schools in local educational markets; (2) promotional activities such as advertising and public relations (PR) can be considered complementary to the previous strategy (Le Feuvre, Hogan, Thompson & Mockler, 2021). This "edvertising" (Jessen & DiMartino, 2020) can sometimes act as a substitute for real improvement, which is described in the following category; (3) change of school policies and practices is a mechanism by which schools try to meet demand and create their own special profile (in school educational role, change can include curriculum and instructional processes – pedagogy); (4) improvement of academic performance; (5) influencing the socioeconomic or ethnic composition of a school's student body is a controversial strategy already mentioned above.

Rural school and social construction of rurality

The 'rural school' designation is generally viewed as the opposite of the 'urban school'. This approach is similar to the prevailing differentiation of the general rural-urban duality, even though other ways of viewing rural areas may be identified (see Woods, 2010). Just as there is no single archetype of an urban school, neither is there a universal rural school, although it might often include (Gristy, Hargreaves & Kučerová, 2020) some structural characteristics (e.g. a lower total number of students and small class groups) and location and external environmental characteristics (locations in rural settlements and in a green environment). Also, such schools act within social patterns typical of a rural way of life (e.g. close relationships, informal social control).

A rural school became the most frequent type of school after the introduction of compulsory education in most economically developed countries in the 18th century (Solstad & Andrews, 2020), but throughout the 20th century urban schools became the standard used to measure school characteristics such as material equipment, methods of organising instruction, and the scope of the services provided (Cuervo, 2016; Roberts & Green, 2013).

As direct experience with a rural school diverged from the majority society's view, this experience was replaced by images of a "typical rural school" with two extreme positions. On the one hand, rural schools embody the criticism of outdated, poorly equipped institutions with an insufficient number of students and unprofessional teachers providing poorer-quality education. On the other hand, an excessively and uncritically idealistic view is based on some long-adored aspects of life in the country and the characteristics of the rural population such as less anonymous relations, informal social control, pro-community thinking, and societal participation (Majerová, 2005). Agricultural activities on one's own land and a connection to natural cycles are valued, as is an unpolluted environment with environmental values. As opposed to towns and cities, the rural population is supposedly morally "decent" and "folkish" (with an emphasis on manual and non-intellectual activities, also related to employment or lower aspirations in terms of academic performance) (Polouček, 2020), maintains local traditions and culture, resists globalisation, and generally has lower motivation to accept and adopt innovation, etc. (Chromý, Jančák, Marada &Havlíček, 2011). Through their school choice, parents expect and purposefully seek the transmission of many of the above values in rural schools (e.g. Bagley & Hillyard, 2015).

Data and Methods

A mixed approach was used in the research.

Selection of case schools

In our study, we defined rural schools and municipalities on the basis of a context-oriented approach applying quantitative criteria: a set of municipalities with only one state school within the municipality's territory and a population of less than 3,000 inhabitants (in accordance with the definition of a 'town' in the Czech legislation).

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 were used containing school capacity, total number of students and information on the students newly admitted in the previous three years (broken down by place of residence). First, 192 in-demand rural schools were selected using the following indicators: (1) the highest quartile of the school capacity utilisation ratio (over 77.1%); (2) the highest quartile of the share of students from outside the catchment area registered for the enrolment process (over 21.9%).

Of these, we excluded the smallest schools, as their data was too 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 (e.g., the degree of consideration of students' individual needs, pro-community orientation) and the external setting and environment (e.g., the dynamics of the development of the municipality, the extent of the school's catchment area). Thus, on the one hand, the socio-geographic data on the municipality and school location was analysed (see Kučerová, Meyer, Kučera, Rybová & Šmíd, 2022), and on the other the schools' online presentations and other documents were considered. 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 characteristics that were fulfilled. 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 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.

Case data collection and analysis

The intensive inquiry stage included an anonymised questionnaire survey among the parents of the schools' students regarding their school choice preferences and interviews with three types of stakeholders: a school principal, a mayor of a municipality, and parents who had written their contact details in the questionnaire. The three schools presented here have different explicitly expressed approaches to satisfying parental preferences for students' well-being.

In order to achieve comparability of the cases, we used a pre-structured multiple case study: individual cases are described within the same pre-selected structure. The structure comprises 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) school position, (2) instructional resources and processes, (3) afterschool care, (4) quality of life and (5) having influence. We assumed that if parents seek these characteristics, the schools will address them in their public image.

(1) The "school position" category is characterised both in terms of the geographical location and the school's accessibility and the societal and cultural context (reputation, status, profile). (2) "Instructional resources and processes" include the characteristics of the school leadership and teaching staff, approaches to the instruction processes and learning outcomes, and the school's equipment. In Simonová (2017) the second category is named "Effective education". For the purposes of our study the name was changed in order to describe the object of the research better. (3) "Afterschool care" covers the provision of care for children and possibilities offered for the child's development after school and also catering. (4) The "quality of life" category encompasses both the school's ability to accommodate the student's individual needs and internal conditions and processes, creating a pleasant environment in a physical and psychosocial sense. (5) "Having influence" (from the parents' perspective) means the school's strategies in communicating and cooperating with parents and allowing them to participate in school life.

These categories (1–5) were connected with selected parts of interviews with the stakeholders and the main questionnaire survey outcomes. The most illustrative statements were selected as direct citations to support the statements provided in the case studies.

Results

Although all three case schools are situated in rural areas, they vary in both their external (geographic) and structural characteristics (Table 1).

Table 1: Selected data about three case schools

Data	School A	School B	School C
Geographical position of the region of school´s location	The countryside in a landscape of intensive agricultural production, economically efficient, near the district town	Wider surroundings of the capital, economically developed area but rural settlement structure (villages and small towns)	Inner periphery of the state, economically weak, rural settlement structure (villages and small towns)
School type	Incomplete (Grades 1-5)	Complete (Grades 1-9)	Complete (Grades 1-9)
Number of students	75	180	121
The average number of students in a class	15	20	13
Students from outside the catchment area	50%	78%	46%

Notes:

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)

Source: The authors on the basis of data from the Czech Ministry of Education and Czech Statistical Office

School A: Well-being based on supporting a healthy lifestyle and an environmental consciousness

This school is located six kilometres from the district capital. It has the best transport accessibility of the three case schools. The school has primary grades only. About half of the students are not from the catchment area but from the neighbouring villages and a town within a radius of 15 km. The number of students has risen from 32 to almost 80 over the past nine years, thus exceeding the school's capacity.

The comprehensive changes at the school are associated with the principal, who came to her position ten years ago from the private sector and focused intensively on promotional activities. "...I have spent an incredible amount of time on this... and I think it has been the Alpha and Omega of it all, I mean that people know about us ..." (Principal). By building a positive image of a school focusing on a healthy lifestyle and close to nature, the school's leadership aimed to attract students from outside the catchment area. "... I was simply convinced that if we put it in the framework of nature, I need to appeal to things such as tradition, nature, and so on ..." (Principal). An elaborate marketing strategy is used as "although the school is kind of a state contract, we take it as a firm and actually seek to build the brand as such ..." (Principal). Virtually every day, new information about the school's outdoor activities, events enhancing the positive learning experience, and connection with the locality, community, and nature is posted on social media. The success of this strategy is confirmed by the results of our survey, as all the parents who responded would recommend the school to others.

The agenda of the school's leadership is quite markedly divided between the principal and her vice-principal so as to capitalise maximally on the strengths of both managers. The principal focuses on public relations, communication (including that involving parents) and the development of the school. The vice-principal, as a skilled teacher, is primarily focused on leading instructional processes.

In an effort to fulfil the above-mentioned strategy, the school's leadership chose to use innovative elements in instruction.[1] The school seeks to maximise outdoor lessons to include a wide variety of educational activities and uses a suitable school building location. In each class there is a teaching assistant. The principal declares a strong emphasis placed on the teaching staff's quality: "I would say the teaching staff are really tuned up."

None of the stakeholders reflects any pressure on student performance, and yet the leadership declares that the students transition seamlessly to urban lower secondary schools. The quality of instruction is not primarily assessed through student performance but instead through students' overall development, happiness, and positive perception of the school environment. "They have a fantastic approach to children and their lessons ... My

[1] Hejny Method – socio-constructivist mathematics curriculum, Comenia Script – innovative method of teaching Czech handwriting.

daughter looks forward to school every day, and she likes it there." (Parent). Both the school and the municipality leaders emphasise above-average equipment with didactic aids. "We have Chromebooks for all children … We seek to use various applications during lessons, and the interactive board is absolutely standard." (Principal).

The municipality endorses the school's vision based on supporting the personal happiness of children in the school environment and a positive learning experience.

> It is immensely important to maintain the good feeling from school in the children; making them feel that the school gave them something. They should not feel only obligations and grades. I want the school to work so that the children are happy there… (Mayor).

The school purposefully builds a partnership relationship with the municipality, which shows a keen interest in the school events, too. The intensive collaboration includes results in sports and leisure activities for the local community. Parents greatly appreciate the school's ability to accommodate the various needs of students and their families (including migrant and SEN students).

Well-being at the school is supported by healthy snacks for children for a symbolic fee.

> We make snacks … the parents find it very attractive. Healthy eating was one of the points I highlighted in my vision … We are part of a project entitled 'A really healthy school'. We seek to meet some criteria and make fresh snacks for the children every day. So they always have a kind of little banquet of fruits and vegetables… (Principal).

Spending time in natural surroundings and healthy lifestyle are also key parts of extracurricular activities spanning a range of more or less traditional clubs focusing on sports, creativity, and games, hiking, and experience activities for students and their parents. Classes visit students' homes to stay and play in the gardens, eat healthy food, or bathe in the family's swimming pools. This weakening of the boundaries between the school and home environments is fairly unique in our study. The municipality plans to build another sports ground to serve both the school and the entire local community.

The principal sought a balance between efforts to accommodate the parents' requirements and wishes and involve them in school life as much as possible and the need for clear rules to implement high-quality teaching and fulfil the school's vision. She reflected a shift from the initial "maybe too excessive" openness towards the school's more confident position: "We clearly communicate towards the public what we do here and how we do it. They can see the rules clearly beforehand." The school provides detailed information to parents about virtually all its activities through a website and particularly through social media. This approach is positively reflected and supported by the municipality. "I want the classes to present their activities at least once a week. It does not matter if it is about a good art lesson, being outside, learning natural or national history, geography, or subjects like that …" (Mayor). It appears, however, that although parents and the community are (at least in the Czech context) well-informed, the scope for them to exert real influence on the life of the school is perhaps limited.

School B: Well-being based on relationships, an individualised and partner-based approach, and an inclusive environment

The school is located in a more developed area within the wider surroundings of the capital city. Only two schools are situated within a radius of 15 km. A very high share of students from outside the catchment area (nearly 80%) register for enrolment. Some parents even drive their children 15–30 km to school. The school has one class in each grade and two kindergarten units.

A family-like and safe environment is emphasised, meeting the conditions for the subjective well-being of students by a maximally individualised approach (the school motto is 'Everyone is unique'). Partnership and positive relations among all participants in the educational process aim to support the quality of the learning process (playful learning) and personality development.

> We simply believe that everyone is unique … The teachers, I mean they really take this approach to each student … With each child, we consider what he or she needs, what helps her or him, which method and vision to choose … (Principal).

The staffing is adapted to individualisation, too. There are two to three adults in each class, emphasising tandem teaching, also often in combination with a teaching assistant. According to the school's leadership, the

teachers' cooperation during classes is a fundamental aspect of both quality and their professional development.

> Each class has one or two children who have the right to have an assistant or shared assistant. And the assistant and teacher actually act within pair-based instruction. And if you have a third teacher in there, it is simply a concert (Principal).

The subjective well-being of students is based on a positive learning experience. Therefore, in an effort to implement the curriculum in an individualised and exciting way, stressing spontaneity and activating students, the school integrates teaching concept elements or approaches enhancing these principles in instruction (e.g. Step by Step Programme, Montessori Education, Cyril Mooney Value Education).

The school emphasises developing the students' communication skills, and open communication is also supported through untypical 'first-name terms' between students, the teaching staff, and parents. The school predominantly uses formative assessment; the students receive summary verbal assessments, except for the eighth- and ninth-graders. The students have very good academic results, and yet the school offers voluntary but intensive tutoring to students applying to selective secondary schools.

The principal declares strong support for the professional and personal development of the staff through involvement in projects such as "Helping Schools Succeed" (The Kellner Family Foundation) or "Fair School" (League of Human Rights). In addition to emphasising tandem teaching, the teachers use peer-to-peer lesson observations, regular meetings with information sharing, planning, and disseminating or directly implementing innovations. Neither is the agenda of the school's leadership sharply divided from the teaching staff, and in this sphere too the principal declares that there is cooperation and tandem operation to the greatest possible extent.

The school premises and equipment are average. The space is always used to the maximum extent. Neither the school leadership nor the municipality is considering any enlargement, also in an effort to maintain the "family-like" character of the school setting.

According to the survey questionnaire, the family character and an open, partner-based, and safe environment are the dominant elements in the

choice of this school by parents, who often see it as the opposite of urban schools:

> Both of our children attend this school. They are both introverts. So, we were looking for a school with an individualised approach, a friendly environment, and smaller classes … That was the most important aspect for us – we wanted them to feel really good and safe … (Parent 1).

Weekly class community circles are used to improve the social climate and support the class's cohesion. The school implements projects across grades and offers joint activities for students and teachers outside the school, including stays abroad (the United Kingdom, Sweden). Any particular conflicts are addressed and resolved by negotiation among all those involved, using natural consequences instead of formal sanctions. The school provides a psychologist's services for students and parents, which is available only at a few Czech basic schools.

The school also considers the families' social situation. If a parent is not able to co-finance school meals for her or his child, the school provides free lunches covered by a Women for Women Foundation.[2] In addition, payments for extracurricular activities are structured to enable the participation of all students (the entire class).

The afterschool care centre (for primary school students) and the school club (for lower-secondary students) organise the extracurricular activities. Their offer is based on an untraditional concept of a varied set of thematic workshops, to which students can apply on the basis of their preferences. "All children and parents receive an email with an offer of activities on Sunday evening, so they have time to think it over. And the child can add their name to the chosen activity each morning." (Parent 2) The afterschool care centre is available until 5.30 pm. The school also has a canteen offering "home-like" and nutritionally balanced meals.

Building partnerships is the crucial principle declared by the school. Students are present during parent-teacher conferences; parents can visit the lessons or even participate in them (e.g. presenting their jobs). The school organises many events for students, parents, and the local community in cooperation with the parents' club, and also supports intergenerational

[2] There is no national policy on free school meals in Czechia.

bonds and ties. “I appreciate their ability to engage the locals. School is not only about coming to school in the morning and going home in the afternoon. They can engage both the parents and the locals, the seniors.” (Mayor)

From the mayor’s point of view, the school and its attractiveness are a significant element of the local community’s life and increase its development potential. “I have about two phone calls a month when people ask if we have any available flats or land for sale because they like it here … and that they would move here because of the school.” (Mayor)

School C: Well-being based on a positive learning experience and formation of regional identity

The school is located in a sparsely populated part of the inner periphery on the border of three administrative regions. The settlement structure of the rural area comprises villages and small towns. In the past other rural schools were closed because of low numbers of students, or it was too costly for small municipalities to operate them. Still, school C has always had extraordinary material and marketing support from the municipality, maintaining its position of a traditional catchment school for its surroundings.

The school presents its mission on its website as follows:

> At our school we have all agreed that education and learning are only possible in an environment of sound interpersonal relations, which is also one of the educational goals. School is not a preparation for life but life itself. (…) With our activities, we aim at being a school supporting the culture and future active citizens of our community.

The social climate has been accentuated by both the previous and current school leadership and is also highly appreciated by parents and the municipality. “But I would say the environment in the school itself is most impactful on how the families and the children feel there and on cooperation with the teachers.” (Mayor)

The school is located in a historical manor building surrounded by a large park and athletic grounds. The mayor admits that the fact that the “environment is far from being sterile and typical” may be one of the reasons why the school is in high demand. A parent of a commuting student also says: “It was amazing that he goes to school in a castle!” The survey showed

that the "school's vicinity and environs" were essential key factors in the school's choice.

Besides the aesthetic factor, the untraditional premises also allow safe learning activities in the outdoor environment:

> The teacher observed that the children were not concentrating, and so she took them out into the snow. They were learning about nature, and so went to the park to explore flowers, and it was kind of normal. Then they went out to draw letters in the sand to train their hands … In the first grade, I had the impression that they spent the whole time until December outside, and all of a sudden, they could all read and write in December (Parent).

Amid some anti-pandemic measures against COVID-19 there was a welcome alternative to distance learning: "We had an 'outdoor classroom' in the yard, so we taught here. And we also have various garden houses where instruction took place." (Principal).

The small class size (13 students on average) makes the wide spectrum of learning activities much more manageable. Small groups also allow an individualised approach to each student:

> We were seeking an alternative to the strict traditional learning. My son is creative and has always had many ideas, and he could often bring them to life, as well (…); and I thought it was fine that the child had this chance. I mean that he could build on his strengths and develop further…" (Parent).

Later in the interview, the parent appreciates the emphasis on general competencies for lifelong learning:

> I can see that my son likes working with information; he has no problems with reading; he likes learning; he simply has his interests. That might have been why we talked him out of the selective grammar school, which, on the contrary, stresses factual knowledge.

The stress on a positive learning experience, however, may undermine the efforts to accomplish some goals of education. According to some stakeholders, this learning concept is risky even though it could have motivated some parents to choose school C. That is also why the new principal (who

has been in office for about one year) is shifting the focus to accomplish the required outcomes of the school curriculum:

> I have started preferring the academic aspect of the school, which used to be a bit sidelined and may lead to weaker results for some students (…) And it was also about the distance learning during the COVID pandemic – it is then hard to build on experience…

'Weaker results' mean lower educational aspirations when a high percentage of the school's graduates enter vocational upper secondary programmes. However, this development may also be associated with the structure of the labour market in a peripheral rural area. At the same time, the mayor is convinced that the graduates have sufficient competencies: "If a parent tells me that his little girl attending our school will never make it to higher education, then I am all the more pleased to hear how many of our students have become engineers and doctors later on."

The school curriculum, but even more so its extracurricular activities, has a significant impact on cultural life within the local community and on forming a positive relationship with the place and the region. First and foremost, the historical and cultural potential of the castle premises is intensively used for activities of local and regional significance. The school performs this function for the broad public and various interest groups even more than for the school students.

> There are many exhibitions on the castle premises during the year … They always have a festive opening event with them … there are concerts, lectures, and various workshops for the general public. And they also offer the University of the Third Age attended by seniors from a wider area (Mayor).

For students, the school offers several extracurricular activities supporting the relationship with traditions: "We have clubs focusing on this region, for instance, on handwork and the traditional things made here." (Principal) Several projects prepared by students during lessons had ties to the region and its history, too, including a book prepared in cooperation with the regional museum. All these activities reflect the symbolic and material bonds between the school and community, as is also expressed in another motto on the school's website: "The school collaborates with local associations, institutions, and personalities. The school acts as a cultural centre available to the broad public."

Cross-case comparison

In their self-presentation towards parents, our three case schools reflect different aspects of students' well-being or they do so by using different strategies (Table 2). The rural context is also affected by regional aspects because each of the selected schools is located in a different type of rural area (for details see Kučerová, Dvořák, Meyer, & Bartůněk, 2020). Of course, the schools also have a number of common characteristics: the typical feature of rural schools – a smaller class and school size providing for an individual approach to each student and close relationships between all the students and adults in the school – is of key importance.

Table 2: Typology of in-demand rural case schools according to their responses to parental preferences

Parental preferences	**School A**	**School B**	**School C**
Conceptualisation of students' well-being	A healthy lifestyle and environmental consciousness	Relationships, individualised and partner-based approach, inclusive environment	Positive learning experience and formation of regional identity
Appreciated values of rurality	Close to nature	Interpersonal proximity and relationships	Local and regional identity

Source: The authors, based on the stakeholders' statements

Discussion and Conclusions

We sought to enrich and expand the existing knowledge about school choice with insights related to the strategies on the supply side. Simonová (2017) points out that for an increasingly significant number of Czech parents, the quality of the interaction between teachers and students and generally the child's well-being are even more vital than academic achievement. The main contribution of our study lies in the fact that different possible parental concepts of well-being may correspond to different strategies used by rural schools.

School A is in direct competition with urban schools. Its strategy is based on the promotion of quality comparable to urban schools, with the added value of a healthy and safe rural environment close to nature. The school also emphasises the students' motor activities and the development of good eating habits as part of the healthy diet offered in the school canteen. This strategy meets the principles of the Health Promoting School concept in

many aspects (Young, St Leger & Buijs, 2013; or, in the Czech environment, Nejedlá & Reissmannová, 2015).

School B interprets rural space in terms of "homely" close and intensive interpersonal relationships and catering for each student's individual needs and personal and social development. Within the Czech context, the school is a unique example of a school fulfilling the principles of an inclusive education defined by Booth and Ainscow (2002) by a significant emphasis on relationships, equality, and individualisation. And, moreover, it also fulfils the principles of the three-dimensional meaning of inclusion (see Zilcher & Svoboda, 2019): the maximum degree of individualisation, pro-community orientation, and the creation of a non-restrictive educational environment supporting the equality and development of all students. A student's well-being is significantly connected with creating their sense of belonging (e.g. OECD, 2017)

School C's location in a castle and parks provides for strong ties to traditions and specific local and regional identity. The starting point for creating the students' well-being includes, to a certain extent, efforts to combine well-being within the material, social, and organisational environment (see Havlínová, 1998).

Beyond Zancajo's (2020) classification, yet another school strategy can be identified in our cases aiming at a change in the school environment in its various dimensions (material/biophysical; social-psychological; value/cultural). Of course, such a focus is also related to previous strategies (e.g. it is realised through certain alternative pedagogical procedures or may be a consequence of student selection). The school strategy can emphasise material features or sometimes superficial status symbols, but it can also tailor the school environment to the demands of a certain group of parents for a deeper value orientation. This way, schools located in a rural space may become an attractive choice for urban parents. It is particularly true when the school environment provides the positive characteristics generally attributed to the rural space (e.g. Woods, 2010; Majerová, 2005) and simultaneously offers an acceptable level of learning outcomes.

The real or attributed rurality plays a significant role in the efforts of an attractive rural school to obtain an advantageous position in the regional school quasi-market (Bagley & Hillyard, 2015). The case schools are aware of this fact and work purposefully with these characteristics in their PR. For example, when referring to their environment, they use terms such as

"homely", "rural", "safe", or "healthy". To create a pleasant environment appreciated by parents, the case schools use the potential of their location, whether it is a castle park (C) or natural and landscape setting (A). They also improve the school premises by creating pleasantly arranged and decorated classrooms (B), relaxation zones, athletic facilities (A), outdoor classrooms or garden houses (C), etc.

The case schools share the strategic use of the rural image as a part of their intensive promotional and PR activities, which may partly compensate for the lack of data on their academic performance. They include less anonymous (positive) interpersonal relationships, pro-community orientation, safety, informal social control, and an individualised approach associated with the lower number of students in the school or classes (cf. e.g. Ribchester & Edwards, 1999).

The limitations of our study lie in the generalisability of the results from Czech or post-socialist rural areas. The study shows how individual schools are perceived and presented by stakeholders. Although the statements of the various actors are in good agreement, it would be desirable to triangulate them with more objective tools, for example measuring the cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes of school education. We also know little about the socio-economic composition of the school student bodies, as this data is not routinely monitored in Czechia. Despite that, our study suggests strategies for how rural schools can successfully avoid the risk of closure, use specific capital in their environment, and promote the stability of rural communities.

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