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Distribution, efficiency and choice: Social justice and small schools in rural areas in market oriented education systems.

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Introduction

Throughout Europe, small, rural schools face similar problems of justice and democracy. Despite more diversity in the political development of European states, rural areas are still regarded through a lens of predominantly urban society (Beach et al. 2018). The last decades, have seen a number of key developments in the operation of schools across Europe. Although legitimized through different arguments and ideologies, these developments have resulted in similar results in different European countries (Altrichter et al., 2014; Bajerski, 2015).

We aim to illustrate change processes in education operation with two particular examples; small rural schools in Czechia and England. We make use of Iris Young's (1990) concept of social justice (see also Cuervo 2016) as an analytical framework. Young (2004) 'proposed an enabling conception of justice. Justice should refer not only to distribution, but also to the institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities and collective communication and cooperation' (p.3). Young (1990) also argues that 'to be just is always situated in concrete social and political practices that precede and exceed the philosopher' and so in our comparisons we work with the concrete and the situated. We present first the general position of these types of schools within the education policy of their particular countries. We then examine a series of paradoxes and tautologies in the everyday operation of small, rural areas with a particular focus on school distribution, efficiency and choice.

Method

The methodology uses qualitative case studies of small rural schools in Czechia and England and their geographical communities. The case studies developed knowledge about changes in the wider socio-economic context and driving forces in the educational landscape. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with key actors in the rural communities as well as documentary evidence. The analysis of these two case studies will be presented, concerning experiences in three dimensions: distribution, efficiency and choice.

In Czechia during the 1970's, during the period of state socialism, there was there is a pressure to concentrate education operations outside of rural/small settlements. This pressure was as a result of a special political tool "Conception of settlement development and urbanization". Nowadays there is no central plan for school location neither from the state level of government, nor lower regional levels. Decisions about schools are made at municipal government level, as it is here that responsibility for school operation lies. The majority of rural mayors perceive a local school as a symbol of vitality and autonomy, so school closure almost impossible.

In England, most schools are now part of a Federation, Trust or Academy, a cluster of schools in a locality. They are managed by the management groups or leaders of these clusters and are funded from central government; schools, particularly the small ones, often share leadership and administration systems. Regional authorities still have some role to play in the distribution and funding of some schools. This grouping of schools has reduced school closure rates, but not improved disparity in attainment rates.

Elementary Schools in Czechia have two principal sources of school funding.

1. The Ministry of Education; schools are funded through a sum per student (to cover teacher salaries and key school equipment), which appears to be an equal system. Where there are low numbers of students, additional contributions are made from municipality budget in the case of low number of pupils.
2. Municipality budgets; these fund school operation and related investment (especially school buildings). Small rural (peripheral) municipalities and their schools receive the smallest amount of money, however they have the highest additional costs (Trnková, 2009).

In England school funding is organised using a central government formula. There is a certain payment given per student which is adjusted for certain reasons. These payments are adjusted by local governments for 1. Pupil-led factors: eg deprivation, low prior attainment, English as an additional language, 2. School-led factors: eg sparsity, 3. Area cost adjustment eg for deprivation. Recent changes in the funding formula set out to make the system 'fairer' however some rural schools have had advantageous funding in recent years and the new system is causing problems. With a strict national funding formula based entirely on pupil numbers were to be introduced, small schools would find it even harder to balance their budget. (ref)

School choice. In Czechia, the history of state socialism led to strictly delineated school districts. Nowadays there is free parental school choice, however municipalities are still obliged to delineate school districts by means of a binding regulation and give preference to local students rather than applicants from other districts. There is also a long-term perception of urban school as "better" than rural ones. This has led to overpressure in applications for schools in metropolitan centres. Although the general public meaning is to have a school in a village, the same parents themselves prefer to assign a child to a town.

In England, it is quite the opposite; here rural schools have been associated with romantic ideas of a rural idyll. Families opted to send their children to rural schools, on the edges of towns.

Pressure on concentration of educational function outside rural/small settlements in former times in Czechia has led to a centre – periphery dichotomy. There is a general public view that there should be a school in every village however the parents prefer to assign their children to urban schools. In England, there has been less pressure to close schools in peripheral areas, in part because of the move to cluster schools into locally managed groups. Here there also remains a notion of the rural idyll to some extent, with parents choosing schools outside of urban centres for their children.

Conclusions

The liberalisation and marketisation of education from the 1980's have led to significant changes in the organisation and operation of schools in Western Europe. Schools and the wider education systems in these countries reacted to the new conditions which included the closure of small schools and the consolidation of schools into larger units. Some Western European countries are still witnessing these school closures.

Following a phased delay, at the beginning of the 21st century, these market orientated forces arrived in those countries which were a part of the Eastern (Soviet) Bloc before 1989. However in these post-socialist countries a mass reduction in the number of schools and a concentration of educational function to urban centres was finished in the 1980's through the actions of centralised government policy.

There are two major groups of systems operating here both with inherent injustices, particularly for small schools in rural areas. There is an increasingly decentralised system with the transfer of responsibility (including financial responsibility) from central governments, to local authorities or even to parents. On the other hand there are forces of national centralisation which struggles for optimisation of school networks with a view to financial efficiency, as well as social control of education.

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