

# RURAL SCHOOL IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY-LED LOCAL DEVELOPMENT\*

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The paper is based on the general concept of knowledge society and deals with regional development theories which emphasize local environment as an important part of rural development. The following two questions were studied: (1) What is the early experience of municipalities when establishing a Community School? (2) In which other municipalities would it be possible and appropriate to build such a school? For this purpose, both secondary and primary research methods were combined with data collection techniques – document study, observation, and questioning. Because the examined problem is set in the context of community-led local development (CLLD), violation of the ‘bottom-up’ approach principle is also highlighted. The paper presents the first experiences in the establishment of seven Community Schools within the Pilsen region and based on them also recommendations for the feasibility and suitability of establishing this type of school in other rural municipalities. The results show that the educational sector is not assisting in the modernization of rural schools with regard to community education and that the possibility of the contemporary and meaningful existence of schools in small rural municipalities remains ignored.

community education; knowledge society; rural development



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## INTRODUCTION

The expressions like ‘educational society’, ‘knowledge society’, and ‘society of knowledge’ are widely used in contemporary globalized societies. They express both the requirement and belief that progress in education is an effective tool for resolving social problems and also for the development of democracy and civil society. This opinion is included both in theoretical concepts (e.g. by D. Bell, P. Drucker, R.E. Lan, N. Stehr) and the reaction to them in practice. There are also works challenging the optimistic vision of the educational society (e.g. L i e s m a n n, 2012). Their criticism points out the quality of education in situations where education becomes a mass-desired commodity. The accompanying phenomenon is usually the devaluation of education (K e l l e r, T v r d ý, 2008).

However, we do not find doubt about the needs of lifelong learning, which is in contemporary society

aimed both at increasing employability and supporting active citizenship. Lifelong learning is carried out mainly by further education or adult education. Community education is considered as an effective mean of it (R a b u š i c, R a b u š i c o v á, 2008). Foreign experiences point to close relation between community education and local school and highlight its positive effect on the local development.

One of the consequences of the organization of mass society is the problem called the crisis of community<sup>1</sup>, or the crisis of community life. K e l l e r (2012) states that the relative autonomy of the social community in a global society has vanished. The community today is often limited to spatial units with a dispersed network of interpersonal relationships. A rural community is one of the basic types of communities (Gemeinschaft),

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<sup>1</sup> see page 34.

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based on a spatial neighbourhood. In the case of rural communities, a phenomenon known since the 1960s as the 'rural exodus' is a proof of the afore-mentioned crises. Rural society has not yet found an authentic way of how to provide today's people with attractive living conditions.

Concepts that appeal to the authenticity of rural development, while responding to the request for an educational society, emphasize the local socio-cultural environment as an important source of development (Amin, Thrift, 1995; Hudson, 1999), and the ability of local communities to learn how to cooperate (Maskell, Malmberg, 1999; Morgan, 2007). When we connect both aspects, it is a reproduction of what is known as tacit knowledge and expertise and innovation formed on their basis (Lam, 2002; Lundvall, Nielsen, 2007). Such innovations originate within the given community because tacit knowledge cannot be converted into algorithms, guidelines, and other codified forms, but is transmitted by sharing in the process of acquisition and transformation

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<sup>1</sup> The community is, however, from the sociological point of view, a social formation with unique social bonds that point to a relatively homogeneous value orientation of members, mutual emotional ties, rather informal social relationships, multiple and reciprocal communication links. The peculiarity of these links has an impact on the reduction of formalised hierarchical structures that dominate everyday life in a modern society (Maříková et al., 1996). From a pedagogical point of view, the community is defined as a natural local community where school fulfils the role of natural and social centre of the municipality (Přicha et al., 2013). Community education in context of the Czech Republic could be characterized as a set of activities which form possibilities for members (individuals, schools, NGOs or public and private organizations) of the community to become partners while resolving the problems of the community. Community education is based on the idea of responsibility of the people for quality of life within the community and also on the idea that everybody has the right to participate in meeting the needs of members of the community (Knotová, 2008). Community School in the Czech Republic could be defined according to Czech educational policy documents as a school which, beside the traditional education, enables also extracurricular activities like lifelong learning, active participation of members of the community in education within the school and using of current potential of the community (Lauerma, 2008). Rural Community School in the Czech Republic is defined as 'an educational facility which is located at a municipality of less than 5000 inhabitants, with prescribed legal form (NGOs, municipal contributory organization, secondary economic activity of the local school), which offers lifelong education to adult residents of the catchment area, and regularly participates in community development activities and community life, managing its own budget and respecting the principles of financial self-sufficiency and sustainability'. For more details see Tupý (2013) page 52; Holoubková (2013) page 37.

in skills which remain the property of the respective community. The common denominator of the presented concepts is the integrated neo-endogenous rural development arising from a multidisciplinary linkage of geography, economics, and sociology with political science (Lošťák, 2007b).

According to studies on community education and schooling (Coleman, 1987; Lauerma, 2010; Heers et al., 2011) it is possible to state that community education:

(a) is referred to as modernization of classical education, which extends:

- its socialization function (not only educates but also rears);
- its social function (intentionally searches for multiple partnerships, helps students become involved in social networks, enhances their social capital);
- its socio-political function (mitigates social exclusion, removes barriers in access to education);
- its temporal dimension (full-day effect, after formal education, ongoing education is undertaken, aiming at both better opportunities on the labour market, i.e. the enhancement of human capital, and also at gaining cultural insight, i.e. the acquisition of cultural capital);

(b) is beneficial to the local community – with the increase in the human/cultural and social capital of its members, the development potential of the whole community increases.

It is necessary to add that there is a lack of empirical evidence on the improved quality of community education. This could be expected, especially in the United Kingdom where the concept of what is known as 'extended schools', which resonate with the character of Community Schools, is being applied. Lauerma (2010) points to a better level of achievement of children in these schools. Heers et al. (2011) stated that literature on Community Schools recounted their success stories, but did not document better performance of their students by a comparative research.

This paper focuses on community education<sup>2</sup> in a Czech rural area. The general considerations outlined above are transformed into resolving practical issues – how, by acting in a specific locality, to create an effective linkage between the need for a close, inner, local world and the respect for the requirements of a remote, external, global world, so that community education in the rural areas

- benefits the local community inwards (not only substituting for the role of the formal school system), as well as its relationships within the broad social environment;
- maintains and promotes confidence in its actors in the rural areas, as a result of repeating the transactions after a positive experience with this institution.

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<sup>2</sup> Part of further education and lifelong learning within educational system of the Czech Republic.

We follow special interest education for leisure time, aimed at the integration into local culture and community (to the local identity), and professional education, with a view to integration of the local population in the wider society through the labour market. It is oriented towards adult students and their families as lifelong education with a cultural function. The main (coordinating) actor is the rural school<sup>3</sup>, as the most appropriate and historically verified institution for community education.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study material and results presented within this paper were collected in two phases. The first phase included secondary research, while the second phase consisted in primary research arrangement. Completed and processed data from both research phases, which concerned the monitored case study (see below), were subsequently compared with the information on rural Community Schools/rural community education in the Czech Republic and abroad (see Discussion).

Firstly, selected data gained from Czech and foreign specialist books and professional journals on community education as well as data obtained from relevant Czech legislative documents (especially issued by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic (MEYS)) and documents of other institutions concerning community education in the Czech Republic were subjected to secondary analysis. Articles published in the professional journal *Učitel'ské listy* (Teaching sheets) and research reports that addressed the discussed issue served as additional literary sources.

The second phase involved collection and processing of primary data (supplemented by the analysis of secondary data where necessary). A research team of 4 teachers and 2 students of the Faculty of Economics and Management, Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, monitored the implementation of the project<sup>4</sup>,

<sup>3</sup> Rural schools are not exactly defined in the Czech Republic, but usually the term means schools within municipalities with number of inhabitants up to 2000 and more broadly (also in this paper) up to 5000 inhabitants.

<sup>4</sup> The project called 'Creating a network of rural Community Schools in Pošumaví region – local partnerships aimed at promoting equal opportunities for men and women' was implemented from the 4th quarter of 2010 to the 3rd quarter of 2013 as one of the projects realized by LAG Pošumaví and supported by Axis IV LEADER of EU funded Rural Development Programme. Within the project, seven Community Schools were established, with the intention of being centres of the newly formed local partnerships for educational activities, with a specific focus on the promotion of equal opportunities for men and women (in the reconciliation of family and career and involvement in the community solution of local development). This aim also included assistance with the expansion of the network after the project completion.

from its very beginning, aimed at building a network of Community Schools on the territory of LAG Pošumaví<sup>5</sup>. This research took place in the period of 2012–2013 and followed two basic questions:

(1) What is the early experience of municipalities when establishing a Community School?

(2) In which other municipalities would it be possible and appropriate to build such a school?

The monitoring was carried out by a triangulation of three research techniques and the procedure of data analysis was based on comparison of information provided by different respondents and on observed facts:

(1) A non-participant observation took place during meetings (10 in total) of the relevant implementation team with participation of selected members of the research team (2–4). This technique was used when dealing with the first research question.

(2) The study of documents focused on two different types of data sources – sources from basic statistical databases and other documents providing data about the municipalities environment (in which the project was implemented, other municipalities predicted for possible establishment of Community School); documents concerning the implementation of the project (regularly issued press releases, minutes of the meeting of the implementation team, event, a.o.). This technique was mainly used when dealing with the first research question. Suitable localities were identified in two micro-regions (MR 1, MR 2), which belong to the territory of LAG Pošumaví, with the opportunity for establishing and functioning of rural Community School (we build on the definition of rural Community School – see Introduction). For both micro-regions, a brief analysis of the demographic and socio-economic situation (using secondary data from basic statistical databases) with a focus on selected criteria for the assessment of objective conditions suitable for the establishment of Community School was carried out – geographical location and accessibility (as Community School should meet the selected educational needs of residents of the catchment area), demographic structure of the population (as it shows the parameters of the target population's education), potential participation given by the existence of a local school and local societies (as the Community School works towards the final solution of creating local partnerships). One locality in MR 1 and three localities in MR 2 met the objective conditions. Four municipalities which were chosen (using the

<sup>5</sup> This local action group brings together 22 partners, 9 of which are entities organized on a territorial basis – 3 towns and 6 micro-regional associations (voluntary associations of municipalities), which include 99 municipalities. LAG Pošumaví has long been active, with the success rate of projects supported by grants in the rate of 59.33% in 2007–2013.

methods presented above) became objects of the interviewing technique (see below).

(3) Semi-structured interviews providing information for the first research question were conducted with representatives of community education in their respective communities (7 Community Coordinators<sup>6</sup>), representation of these communities (7 Mayors and Deputy Mayors), and other persons responsible for the project implementation (Project Coordinator and Project Manager). There were 21 such interviews (lasting 150–255 min). There were no problems and the interviewers acquired no impression that any of the respondents wanted to conceal anything or to respond untruthfully. The questionnaire covered the following points of interest:

- establishment of local Community School using the ‘bottom-up’ approach;
- origin of inspiration for establishing particular local Community School;
- advantages and disadvantages of establishing local Community School;
- motivation for undertaking the position of Community Coordinator;
- ideas related to the role of Community Coordinator and their fulfilment;
- experiences related to acting as Community Coordinator;
- ideal profile of Community Coordinator;
- resonance of establishing particular local Community School.

Attention paid to particular points of interest differed depending on the type of the interviewed person. The interviews were conducted in all seven municipalities where Community School was established.

Semi-structured interviews used for the first research question were conducted in municipalities meeting the criteria for the possible formation and functioning of Community School. These interviews were aimed at opinion and attitudes of local governmental representatives (in selected 4 municipalities) to potential establishment and functioning of Community School in their municipalities. These could be called endogenous factors of establishing and functioning of Community Schools. The factors consist of assessment of technical facilities for Community School,

assessment of cooperation and creating partnership for functioning of Community School and profiling suitable persons for the role of Community Coordinator.

## RESULTS

This part summarizes the results of the case study on the establishment of Community Schools in the Pilsen region.

### Application of the ‘bottom-up’ approach (principle of endogenous local development)

The basic results were influenced by the fact that the relevant rural Community Schools were established within the framework of a special project (as studied document) with specified administrative and organizational requirements.

The interviews with Community Coordinators revealed that the establishment of 6 out of 7 Community Schools was challenged ‘from above’<sup>7</sup>, which contradicts the principles of the endogenous approach to the rural development (4 out of these 6 schools could not be established without a challenge). On the other hand, from the interviews with mayors, project manager, and project coordinator it followed that the initiators and applicants/project implementers (representatives of one school) were inspired by the activities of the national network of rural Community Schools and also by other activities that took place in collaboration with local actors of the LAG Pošumaví. This initiating moment is consistent with the endogenous approach. The afore-mentioned double-tracking is reflected in the first experience that was gained during the project implementation.

### The first experiences of the established rural Community Schools (the first research question)

The persons participating in the preparation of the project (mayor, project manager, and project coordinator), but also in its practical implementation (Community Coordinators) stated, that one of the disadvantages was the specific focus of the project on equal opportunities for men and women, as this topic did not arouse much interest in the municipalities and did not match the needs of the inhabitants (their leisure and professional interests) and the locality as a whole (for its development).

On the contrary, an advantage in the initial institutionalization of the school was the high level of awareness of Community Coordinators of all the necessary circumstances of the establishment of rural

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<sup>6</sup> Community Coordinator (in our research represented by 4 women and 3 men) is a person who was elected with regard to activity in the municipality and who is in charge of community education. His/her primary mission is to develop the whole educational process. The person should accept the position of Community Coordinator on a voluntary basis, but receives a temporary job as well. Before the interviews the researchers got acquainted with all of the Community Coordinators in repeated meetings. Initially, a controlled interview took place, changing into interviews where Coordinators themselves chose the topic of conversation and the interviewer only directed the interview according to the needs of the content given in the record sheet.

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<sup>7</sup> It means not from the centre (state level) but from outside of the locality. So, implementer of the project of Community Schools was not local, but he came from the “mezzo-level”.

Community School. They underwent a quality training course (in the first third of the project implementation). Nevertheless, Community Coordinators searched for further information in order to gain a broader perspective of the issue. This resulted in the absence of organizational and administrative problems when establishing Community Schools<sup>8</sup>, although the agenda was far from simple. The two-year financial support of the Community Coordinator's position and his training in necessary managerial activities was one of the benefits of the project implementation. Both the project initiators and project implementers agreed on these facts.

The afore-mentioned criticism (noted mainly by implementers of the project) concerned mainly the lack of financial support for the educational activities of the schools. This seemed to be disproportionate if compared to the adequate support of managers and advisers the project was equipped with.

A special part of the interviews covering only Community Coordinators brought the ensuing results:

In the initial training course, attention was paid to the position and role of Community Coordinators. These were people invited by local authorities, usually directly by Mayors. Their motivation for accepting the offer can be divided into the following groups: practical (to gain a temporary job, utilize their qualification, try flexible working hours, make use of leisure time), ideological – self-directed (interest in the idea of community planning, opportunity of personal development), and ideological – community-oriented (to contribute to the education of fellow citizens and the development of the municipality).

Community Coordinator's reasons for accepting the position were also combined, with neither of the motivation groups significantly prevailing. The perceptions of the performance of Community Coordinator did not differ much from the respondents' expectations. Experience of performance in the role of Coordinator accentuates problems with administrative demands, difficult negotiations with potential partners and participants of educational courses, and citizens showing little interest in educational activities. And from those stems the rather hesitant attitude towards continuing in the position after the project completion.

Coordinators have a self-awareness of the type of attributes, knowledge, and skills one should be equipped with (education, local authority, skills in dealing with people, collaborative skills, skill of accepting innovative designs and plans, and being imbued with passion and vision). The majority of Coordinators

agree that their nature and role are primarily voluntary, but a certain symbolic reward for the quality of the work is motivational towards a long-term position. However, the point was expressed that such a person should be a professional in the municipality, not only for educational activities, but for all developmental activities in conjunction with the community method of their performance. The needs increase with the increasing size of rural communities, but the Community Coordinator's work success far more depends on the social capital of the local community than on the size of the community.

To date, the leadership of Community Schools has failed in collaborating with the initiatives already existing within the municipalities because:

- these initiatives are looked upon with a greater respect and it is not considered meaningful to create additional initiatives;
- various societies well-established in the municipality satisfy specific interest groups and the municipalities got used to them;
- there is no interest in educational activities (the response to a survey investigating the demand for training courses was minimal);
- there is a lack of practical experience in acting collectively to introduce innovations.

Moreover, there has been a sceptical attitude towards the final solution of the project, which anticipates that Community Schools should be key actors in the developmental activities of the municipality, based on community discussions. Closer interconnection with local school activities is considered beneficial, although not necessary. Schools can benefit from providing space for activities, disseminating information about Community Schools, and facilitating the involvement of pupils' parents who represent a significant target group for community education.

With the exception of introduction of some one-off courses (language courses, computer skills), the interest in the foundation of Community Schools in municipalities is minimal. Only repeated personal contacts have any success in attracting supporters of Community School and those interested in its activities. This lack of interest is experienced in spite of the educational introductory course which offered quality information on the principles and methods of planning and decision-making processes, including public involvement in community projects, discussions and the process of identifying the main problems of the municipality to be resolved in this manner.

#### **Establishment of rural Community Schools at further selected localities (the second research question)**

Research into the endogenous factors which influence success of establishment and functioning of Community Schools within the four selected municipalities, which meet the stated objective conditions

<sup>8</sup> They were established in the period February–April 2012 as citizens' associations. Since the date of registration with the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, the work of Community Coordinators started with assembling an implementation team within the membership of the formed association. The issue of seeking the members was problematic in 4 out of 7 cases.

(geographical location, transport accessibility, demographic structure of the population, and existence of a wide spectrum of local institutions and organizations which could participate in activities of rural Community School), made it possible to divide these factors into four groups: (1) technical provision of the Community School operation; (2) level of cooperation of local initiatives as a potential for creating local partnerships for community development; (3) staffing and organization of Community School activities; (4) involvement of the local population in the institute.

The basic results place these groups of factors, according to the extent of difficulties assessed by the municipality representation (based on interviews with mayors of these municipalities):

It is not a problem to provide technical background (including computer equipment and Internet connection) for training courses available all year round.

There is no problem to support the project of the Community School foundation (promotion, material and financial support).

Deficiencies in cooperation with various societies, associations and companies in the municipality have only rarely been found and assumed.

A larger but still not significant problem is the fact, that volunteer activists of the Community School might not be simultaneously municipal councillors, but must be involved in the issue, have natural authority confirmed by their commitment to the municipality. It also seems to be problematic, that at least half of the proposals for the position of Community Coordinator coincided with occupation as a teacher, or the local school's headmaster; other proposals were directed not at the working position, but at public involvement in the municipality (always involving busy people).

Large-scale problems are considerable doubts about the fact whether local residents understand the mission of Community School. Another large-scale problems (but on a case-by-case basis) are also seen in the fragmentation of activities at a relatively small locality, not founded contribution of the Community School for the municipality, doubts about the voluntary acceptance of the Community Coordinator role.

#### **Comparison of basic results according to the respondents with and without experiences with the establishment of local Community School**

If we compare the results of both research activities, a discrepancy arises between the respondents who already have the experience and those who base their assessment on as yet unrealized ideas. This applies mainly to the technical (mainly financial) security of the Community School equipment and its interconnection with the local school. Regarding the technical provision of the Community School, project participants had higher expectations with regard to financial support. They are probably confronted with the prepara-

tory training courses, including the evaluation of the allocation of project funds, which aroused suspicions of a funding imbalance between the designing/controlling party and the implementing party. Regarding the interconnection of Community School with the local school, this problem was far more accentuated by those not involved in the project.

#### **DISCUSSION**

This section of the paper turns back (from the case study) to general perspective of the study issue.

The very diverse applications of community education influenced by the cultural and historical contexts of different foreign societies can be explained by the fact that the concept of the Community School is rather young (about 90 years). It has been implemented in Europe since the 1960s. In Central and East Europe, it has been implemented for approximately 20 years (Holoubková, 2013). Nevertheless, we can arrive at some common principles which can be compared with the results of our case study in the Pilsen region.

The 'bottom-up' approach within the researched case study of establishing a network of Community Schools within the Pilsen region took curious form. This approach was used during the initiation of the supported project. However, participation in network of rural Community Schools did not proceed using of 'bottom-up' approach, but by invitation of the initiator of the project. Maybe there will be problems with sustainability of the project results.

The establishment of local Community Schools has little respect of the institution of the school as an initiator, coordinator, and main deliverer of relevant activities, which are not only educational, but also serve for the development of the rural municipality. Coase (in Lošťák, 2007a) and Coleman (1987) connect the Community School mission with maintaining and strengthening of the collective social capital of the municipality and challenge the course participants to become involved in the network structures, beyond the local environment. This latter function is fulfilled in the currently established rural Community Schools in the Pilsen region via an emphasis on such educational activities that are aimed at improving the employability of the participants in the labour market. Such activities can be characterized as currently useful. Only these activities reflect a greater interest in participation in Community Schools. These activities are directed at increasing the employability within the frame of lifelong learning.

A study by the MEYS called 'Analysis of school experienced in implementing the Community School ideas' (MEYS, 2008) states that schools do not interconnect school educational programmes with public life in the municipality, or with adult education, which are considered as additional activities. This applies in

particular to rural schools. We can assume that this is a partial answer to the question why the created network of Community Schools in the Pilsen region does not search for main support in local schools.

Another fact that confirms the hypothesis that the MEYS does not promote the path of modernization through Community Schools, is the orientation of almost ten projects implemented in 2010–2013. Although focused on community education (expansion of education in the country, forming local partnerships, community activities), half of these projects have no direct connection to the institute of the Community School.

In 2009, a project of the MEYS supporting the institutionalization of the Community School was prepared, but suspended for reasons of political changes at that time. Examples of the impact of rural Community Schools can be found in eight regions of the Czech Republic (in three regions only 1 case, in four regions 3 cases, in one region 4 cases).

An exception is the Vysočina region with ten Community Schools and the concept of regional development allowing for the use of schools in the spirit of Community Schools. This region is the seat of the National Network of Rural Community Schools, a partner to the New School (an organization aimed at urban Community Schools). The Pilsen region, or the network of rural schools created on the territory of LAG Pošumaví, if the majority of established schools is maintained, could gain the second position as concerns the number of rural Community Schools.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, recommendations for creating a favourable environment for the formation of Community Schools within the rural areas in the Czech Republic are summarized. The study results will hopefully contribute to the promotion of the so far insufficiently exploited and distributed concept of Community Schools in the Czech Republic, as is also documented by strategic development documents (M o L S A , 2014). At the same time, the study results contradict the opinion on liquidating the rural schools (as it is being discussed in the decision-making sphere), which should be given a chance to reacquire the traditional position of the central cultural institution in rural areas.

If we refuse to overlook such an opportunity, it is necessary to bring about a change in the attitude of the decision-makers and support community education (with the central role of the Community School) in rural areas, by modifying the legislative framework, using international experience (mainly that of Great Britain), and by recommending certain objective conditions (accessibility in the defined rural areas, proportion of the economically active population there,

a range of local initiatives as participants in the local developmental activities).

In the initial phase of the institutionalization of rural Community Schools, a legal form of civic association appears to be proven. It is necessary to emphasize the advantageous pricing conditions of rural Community School activities (in comparison with similar activities offered by other organizations) and to focus on courses that do not require certification.

Further conditions can be called 'soft', tied to the social and cultural potential of the local environment:

- the offer of training courses should be based on local interests and derived from the parent-child connection;
- representation of the rural Community School should evoke public interest in the form of civic participation, create public habits for lifelong learning, the ability for tutoring (the area of cultural capital);
- representation of the rural Community School should be involved in the networks (inside and beyond the locality) facilitating coordination and teaching activities (the area of social capital).

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