

Secondary School as a Partner in Community-Led Local Development

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Abstract: The main goal of vocational secondary schools is to pass on to students both theoretical information and information needed for current and future practice. The Europe 2020 strategy confirms this goal as it puts emphasis on the environment, innovations and education, primarily regarding schools specializing in agriculture. The aim of this paper is to assess what position vocational agriculture schools have within the system of secondary schools in the Czech Republic, and whether they can contribute to becoming so-called community centres in the given municipality, or whether they possibly already implement certain activities leading to the community function. The survey included primary and secondary research; in primary research qualitative approach was used in the form of in-depth individual interviews with members of the management of selected vocational agriculture schools. In secondary research, selected strategic documents on transnational and national level and expert articles focused on community education were analysed. It is evident that vocational agriculture schools strive to use all potential ways to increase their attractiveness and want to participate in local life. However, they are burdened with paperwork and problems that hinder the implementation of other attractive activities undertaken by schools.

Keywords: secondary schools, agricultural education, community function of schools

Introduction

Since the 1970s, expert discourse has developed on the topic of knowledge society. The discourse has two distinct streams. The first can be labelled as rational optimistic and is represented mainly by authors from the first period of the said discourse (Lane, 1966; Blau et al., 1967). Their optimism includes the belief that knowledge will force prejudices of ideological and politicizing nature out from the development of society and will make way for technology as the main factor in economic development. Authors who also include the social dimension in the development have challenged this opinion. Their understanding is that access and acquisition of higher levels of education by no means implies reduction of social inequalities (Boudon, 1973; Bowles et al., 1976). They include a wider social and cultural environment in the relationship between education and the ability to make use of it (Goleman, 1996). At the same time, a group of critics is established in the second stream that draws the attention to the functioning of schools as organizations preserving the status quo in society, which naturally also includes reproduction of inequalities (Bourdieu et al., 1970). In this spirit, a critique of educational systems in current society emerges. It is focused primarily on phenomena and processes of devaluation, commercialization and market orientation of education (Lohmann, et al., 2002). The critical stream culminates in P. K. Liessmann's *Theory of Miseducation* (Liessmann, 2009). In the framework of the discourse in current education on both theoretical and practical levels, also life-long learning is in the centre of attention.

In 2020, the European Commission adopted a new Europe 2020 strategy (hereinafter referred to as "Strategy") that built on the older Lisbon Strategy. The Lisbon Strategy set out relatively ambitious goals for the first decade of the new millennium, whose fulfilment fell short of expectations in many aspects. Therefore, it was vital that the new strategy should set out realistic goals that would help us deal with existing problems and create conditions for balanced and sustainable growth. The key priorities in the Strategy include emphasis on the environment, innovations and education. In the Czech Republic (CZ), the Strategy is followed by national strategic documents that deal with, among other things, life-long learning and the potential community functions of schools and aim to implement practices that are already in place in other countries in Europe and outside Europe.

The concept of community education originated in the USA. Although community schools have the longest tradition in the USA, no unified model of community education exists in the country.

However, it is included in federal laws, education development strategies and it is supported by various foundations and regional organizations. The Coalition for Community Schools (Lauermann, 2008) is the umbrella organization. Blank et al. (2003) include among the elements of community education also the fact that specific attention is given to small rural schools. Articles that deal with community education in the United States (McConnell et al., 2002) show that it is not focused solely on primary schools, but that community schools are also among secondary schools, although the number is smaller than that of primary community schools.

In the United Kingdom, schools that implement community education are known as so-called “extended schools”. Also, in the UK the community aspect is supported by the government in the form of strategic documents that represent a methodological framework for the implementation of community education in practice, e. g. a document called *Community Learning and Development* (CLD, 2017), and by other organizations, such as the NGO ContinYou. In the Netherlands, community schools connect schools and the local communities and focus more strongly on the local environment (Heers et al., 2011). The share of community schools among secondary schools in the Netherlands is higher than among primary schools (Heers et al., 2014). In Belgium, community education is applied in both primary and secondary education and the same emphasis is put on the connection between educational environment and everyday environment (Lauermann, 2008). Community schools in Germany are known as “all-day schools” (Heers et al., 2011). There are two types of community schools. The first one is so-called open community schools that offer free-time afternoon courses and activities. The other type are so-called integrated schools that better reflect the concept of community education as it is understood in other countries. These schools provide regular and systematic education during the whole day (Heers et al., 2011). Hungary established a National Commission for Community Education to support community education, which provides methodological and specialized support for anyone interested in the community function of schools. A Hungarian Federation of Community Schools was also set up, which supports community schools and also has a coordination role. Another keyway in which community education is supported is institutionalization and legislative implementation of the position of community coordinators at individual schools (Lauermann, 2008).

Community education in countries outside Europe has its specifics, but even their certain shared features of community education can be detected. One of them is the application of the concept in rural areas that are often also on the periphery, remote and not easily accessible by transportation. And it is in areas like these where community education plays an indispensable role in making education accessible to locals (Efird, 2015; Maber, 2016; Oktari et al., 2015). The accessibility of educational activities in place of residence and their evident benefit for individuals and the community raises the awareness of other members of the community of the importance of education. Moreover, using local environment for educational activities is more attractive and appealing to members of the local community. An example of this is community education in Myanmar and Thailand. Community education in China is strongly focused on environmental issues, for which it uses local environment. It highlights volunteering and the inclusion of both parents and children in community education. All this supports local identity, which can have a positive impact on the willingness of young people to stay in the given rural area in the future. The situation is similar in Egypt and Ghana. Community education in Indonesia includes, among other things, regular meetings of members of the community and the management of the local school, activities organized by the school together with the local community using the school premises and a close cooperation between the school and the parents, also regarding extracurricular activities.

The article focuses exclusively on secondary education and more specifically on vocational agriculture education in CZ (VAS). The main goal of vocational secondary schools is to pass on to students both theoretical information and information needed for current practice as well as future practice. This mission of secondary schools, mainly those specialized in agriculture, directly connects the three abovementioned areas in the Strategy. The aim is to provide information if agriculture secondary schools are interested and assume to become community centres and increase their attractiveness.

Methodology

The main method of the primary research was individual in-depth semi-structured interviews with members from two lists. The first list included vocational schools that teach field of study 41 (Agriculture). They are VASs that teach only agricultural subjects, VASs that teach the field of study Agriculture and another 1-2 related fields of study, and VASs that teach the field of study Agriculture and another 3-5 related fields of study. The list is generated from the Register of Schools and School Facilities. The other list is generated in line with the regional division in accordance with the 2014–2020 Regional Development Strategy of the Czech Republic (hereinafter referred to as "RDS CZ"). From this list, VASs in towns with over 5,000 inhabitants were selected, which cover all types of regions (developing, stabilized and peripheral). A total of 27 interviews were conducted. The questions aimed first to establish opinions on the position of vocational agriculture schools within the system of secondary schools and second on the issue of community centres connected to VASs.

In the secondary research, the main method applied was an analysis of documents. The transnational Strategy was the basic document, together with the 2020 Strategy for Education Policy of the Czech Republic (hereinafter referred to as the "Czech Education Strategy"), which is based on the Strategy. Its general aim is to improve the results and motivation of children, pupils and students in all levels of education. At the same time, it aims at the development of the system of education based on the concept of life-long learning. The end of effectiveness of the Czech Strategy meant a new follow-up document for the next period had to be prepared. Therefore, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports has prepared and gradually implements the Czech Strategy 2030+. In the core of the document are two strategic goals and four strategic lines. The first strategic goal is defined as focusing education on increasing the key competencies and literacy of pupils, students and citizens, and the second strategic goal is defined as decreasing inequality in access to quality education and allowing a maximum development of the potential of pupils and students. One of the main implementation documents of the Czech Education Strategy is the Long-Term Plan for Education and the Development of the Education System in the Czech Republic for 2015–2020 (hereinafter referred to as the "Long-Term Plan"). It puts emphasis on further improvement of the quality of vocational education and on deepening collaboration between schools, employers and the Labour Offices. The Long-Term Plan also includes a chapter on Education for Sustainable Development (hereinafter referred to as "ESD"). Its goals include the creation of a functional environment for further education that will allow the acquisition of knowledge and competences in the field of sustainable development and that will systematically offer updated educational programmes for educators, the public administration, business and non-governmental non-profit organizations focused on practical implementation of the sustainable development strategy and that will ensure the accessibility of ESD for the public across the Czech Republic. In view of the preparation of the Czech Strategy 2030+, its goals and measures, a Long-Term Plan for Education and the Development of the Education System in the Czech Republic for 2019–2023 (hereinafter referred to as the "2023 Long-Term Plan") was prepared. It includes three key goals: 1) more money for high-quality work of teachers; 2) finalization of the revision of the curriculum and support for the implementation of innovated Curriculum Frameworks in schools; 3) improvement of management of schools and school facilities by making more efficient the collaboration between the headquarters and the middle management element (regional authorities).

In the field of vocational education, the principles of European cooperation are defined in the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training. In addition to a vision of the development of education in Europe until 2020, it names four strategic goals that correspond to the comprehensive orientation of life-long learning (formal, non-formal, informal): 1) implement life-long learning and mobility; 2) improve the quality and efficiency of education and training; 3) promote equality, social cohesion and active citizenship; 4) improve creativity and innovations, including entrepreneurial skills, at all levels of education and training.

Other documents that were analysed and that are linked to the topic of the paper include RDS CZ, which sets out four priority areas, of which Priority Area 1 – Regional Competitiveness is closely connected with the topic of the paper, primarily Priority 1: Use of the Potential of Developing Areas, Priority 3: Improving the Quality of Social Environment in Developing Areas, and Priority 9: Support to Cooperation at Local and Regional Levels. The currently prepared document called Regional

Development Strategy in the Czech Republic 21+ (hereinafter referred to as “RDS CZ 21+”) builds on RDS CZ. Its aim is to carry out adequate interventions in various regions of CZ in order to fulfil the main aim of regional policy – to reduce inequalities between these regions and support sustainable development – which stands on three pillars: social, economic and environmental.

Results and Discussion

The results of in-depth interviews were analysed and, using induction, the relationships between them were generalized (Blaikie, 2000).

Opinion on the position of vocational agriculture education within the system of secondary schools

Twenty members of school management included in the survey said that compared to other secondary schools, VASs were undervalued. Fourteen of them believe that the reason is that agriculture itself is not perceived positively as it is not fully appreciated and the public views it as a sector that is not technically and technologically very developed and they judge agricultural education accordingly. Five respondents think that this view is supported by the fact that VASs are attended by less academically able students who do not have the necessary study skills and who apply for these fields because they believe they will be accepted since secondary schools have a shortage of students. There is no positive promotion of the whole agricultural sector and no raising awareness of its importance as a source of food and more (nine representatives stated this opinion). Two claimed that the situation used to be better when VASs fell under the remit of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic. Nine representatives said that their school was “specific” (they were schools with the field of study “Gardening” and schools with technical fields of study) and a majority of them (7) consider VASs as schools with the same position as other schools. No members of the management rated the position of VASs as better in comparison with other secondary schools.

Opinions on the possibility to become a community centre

Twelve members of school management said it was a good idea, two of them pointed out that it was a good idea especially in case of smaller towns. On the other hand, the same number of representatives of schools (12) believe it is impossible for a school to become a community centre (9x no, 3x not yet). Only one school explained it was because there was an active cultural centre in the town. The last three schools are not against the idea of a community centre, but they are waiting.

Organization of social and cultural activities to support local identity, regional development, other social and cultural activities, activities to support skills for employment, sports activities, other activities

Social and cultural activities to support local identity

Twelve schools said that they were actively involved in Christmas and other markets, exhibitions where they presented their own products. Six schools do Christmas or Advent decorations in their town. Six schools organize graduation balls or balls for alumni. Students of two schools organize the St. Nicolas and the Devil visits in nursery schools. Four forestry schools take part in a very special activity, when their trumpeters open Advent events in their towns. Students of a school that apart from specialization in Agriculture also has a specialization in Social Work have internships in the Local Social Care Facility. Other schools listed the following activities: a horse-riding club, Hubertus hunting rides, a Day of the Town Patrons, Opening of the Theatre Season, the Contact festival, revitalization of fishponds, the Clean up the Czech Republic event, competitions for parents.

Social and cultural activities to support regional development

Eleven schools do not organize any activities that fall under this category. Six schools hold regional competitions. One school organizes a Day with Agriculture, one school organizes a Day with the Czech State Forests, one school organizes the event Earth Day. Specific activities include running an own confectionery (1x), a shop (1x), a cider house (1x), a distillery (1x), doing graphic design for the town (1x), a nature trail (1x), the events Kopidlno Flower (1x), Autumn in Kralovice (2x), decorations for the regional grape harvest (1x).

Other social and cultural activities

The majority of schools (25) included in these activities the Open Doors Day. Eighteen schools organize various events for primary or nursery schools. They include, for example, project days, a Day for Eighth Graders, the event Nature Trail for primary schools, an agricultural club for primary schools, an Adventure Day for primary schools, a Safety Day, a Day for the Environment, a Day for Nursery Schools, a Fairy Tale Day for nursery schools, a Transportation Day for primary schools and nursery schools, workshops for children (in 3 cases), horse riding for children from primary schools and nursery schools, and a Children's Day (in 4 cases).

Activities to support skills for employment

If schools organize these activities, they are intended only for their students (in 7 cases). They include collaborations with Hobby market, Billa, a local company, local agricultural cooperatives, visits to companies and in 2 cases participation in Jobs Markets. Other schools (20 in total) say they do not have to organize these events since there is labour shortage in the fields that they offer education in and companies actively seek new employees among graduates.

Sports activities

Members of the management of selected schools (7 cases) said that their schools did not have own sports facilities and used municipal facilities. In 10 cases they do have their own facilities, but do not rent them out – one school cited security reasons. Eight schools that have a gym rent it out to a primary or nursery school, to football players or to seniors. One of the schools in the survey organizes competitions in extreme sports. A bicycle trip for disabled people is an interesting event organized by one of the schools, while another school organizes a Sports Day with a nursery school and an open-air nursery school.

Other activities

This is an area where schools have the fewest activities. Twelve schools did not mention any activity, the rest of them mentioned one activity each. They included a car training ground, a meeting of nuns and Scouts in the school gym, the participation of teachers in the Academy of the Third Age, the implementation of the project Talents for Firms, the participation in the exhibition Zemē živelka, offering the premises of the Youth Centre during holidays, lectures for preservationists, renting of the shooting range, Youth Fire Fighters Club, providing lunches for a nursery school, a falconry club, organizing a conference on "Drought", maintenance of the cemetery, planting flower beds, the project A Living Hive.

Obstacles to implementation of activities?

Twelve schools included in the survey did not see any obstacles, other schools mentioned time, since they carried out own activities (in 9 cases), fear of security measures (in two cases), in 3 cases they mentioned the lack of interest on the side of the public and in one case the member of management informed that the town had enough clubs, and the involvement of school would be useless.

Like other vocational secondary schools, vocational agriculture schools face a shortage of students. The situation is made worse by the existing opinion that agriculture specializations are outdated, unattractive, unfashionable. Half of the schools consider the possibility of their school becoming a community centre a good idea, the other half have a negative opinion, citing the lack of time and personnel capacities. At the same time, the answers concerning specific ways in which this function could be fulfilled uncovered a wide range of activities across different areas, even in case of schools that responded negatively to the possibility of becoming a community centre. Schools implement activities related to life-long learning taking into account the fact that these activities are often not aimed solely at professional education, but at education that aims to improve the quality of life (e. g., hobbies). Some see this as important, especially in small towns where people know each other, meet each other and prefer activities held face-to-face. Moreover, a survey in Russia and Latvia confirmed that "the rural teachers of both countries have a closer relationship with students, they are more involved in student's life, including out-of-school life" (Jermolajeva et al., 2019, 61).

CZ could also learn from the problems that the other countries that implement community education have had to overcome. For example, in the UK the perception of teachers in society, shortage of pedagogical workers and the limited time they had to develop community activities outside the scope of everyday work caused problems in the implementation of community education (Lauermann, 2008; McConnell, 2002). Respondents in our interviews identified the same obstacles.

A voluntary collaboration between schools, parents, local organizations and other prominent local actors is a shared element of community education. Authors share the same opinion as Harkavy et al. (2002, 52): “A community school is not just another program being imposed on a school. It embodies a way of thinking and acting that recognizes the historic central role of schools in our communities – and the power of working together for a common good. Educating our children, yes, but also strengthening our families and communities so that, in turn, they can help make our schools even stronger and our children even more successful.”

Conclusions

The results of the survey suggest a recommendation on how to increase the attractiveness of vocational agriculture schools. They show that the role of community centres is perceived as vital for vocational agriculture schools. It is a challenge for all actors in local communities.

A potential improved position of vocational agriculture schools might be triggered by a new way of financing. It solves the problem of different financing of same fields of study in individual regions, eliminates the necessity for secondary schools to accept as many students as possible regardless of their study skills in order to acquire financial resources for their activities. The rules for financing that were in place until 2020 and that took into account the number of students meant that headmasters were forced to accept also applicants that were not interested in studying. Slovakia faces the same problems. Začková et al. (2019) inform that changes will be more easily implemented in schools with highly motivated students interested in studying.

On local level, increasing the attractiveness of agricultural education will be conditioned upon connecting schools with local actors. Support by the state authorities will also be of importance.

Only in this way the mission mentioned in Heers et al. (2011, 19) can be fulfilled: “Community schools can become not just places for learning, but also places where children grow up, where students and other members of community are happy to live.”

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