

Spatial factors of curricular equality: Foreign language instruction in Czech lower secondary schools

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Abstract

From an educational justice perspective, it is crucial that all students have equal access to a rich curriculum. This also applies to foreign languages, which have traditionally been considered an important part of education, especially in continental Europe. This study analyses how the spatial location of a Czech compulsory school influences the foreign languages taught. The study is based on census data from the student register (a set of information on all Czech students), which lists for each student what languages they study. Data on students were linked with information about their schools and the municipalities they are located in. Almost all Czech students study English as a first foreign language. The analysis therefore focuses mainly on the availability and choice of further foreign languages. Although about a dozen different foreign languages are taught in Czech schools, German and Russian are dominant (not considering English), followed by Spanish and French. The languages available vary significantly depending on the region of Czechia, the size of the municipality and the type of school (comprehensive, selective). The study results provide important insights into how the spatial factors contribute to inequality of access to broad school curriculum.

Key words:

curriculum,
foreign language learning,
spatial justice,
administrative data,
Czechia

1 INTRODUCTION

The topic of curricular equality has received attention in recent years as a result of processes of marketization and privatization of education, which increase disparities between schools and communities (Zancajo et al., 2025). In this study, we focus on the intersection between curricular and spatial equality on the example of language education of younger adolescents (lower secondary school students) in Czechia, a post-socialist European country. Geography of curriculum can be considered a special case of analysis of access to public services, focused on the unequal distribution and availability of educational opportunities across different geographic areas.

There is general agreement that all students should have the same opportunity to encounter a broad, relevant and high-quality curriculum (Riddle et al., 2025). However, when we look more specifically at adolescent students, we encounter different understandings of what a high-quality and relevant curriculum is. Educational policy and practice face the dilemma of how to adapt education to the various emerging interests of young people and to the needs of practical life, while at the same time maintaining or even improving students' access to post-secondary education (to avoid premature closure of some educational trajectories). This may mean trying to keep the path to higher education open for all young people for as long as possible, i.e. offering (or even mandating)

an academic curriculum with a demanding level of subjects such as mathematics, science or foreign languages to all students. This concept is prevalent in Anglo-Saxon countries. In contrast, education systems in Central Europe were designed to allow students to choose either an academic or a practically oriented curriculum relatively early on. Regardless researchers and politicians lean towards the first or the second opinion, they agree that a student's social background or place of residence should not limit their choice of school programmes or subjects in curriculum.

However, we still have little knowledge about how spatial factors influence curricular opportunities, especially at the primary or lower secondary level. This study contributes to the understanding of which geographical factors influence access to the foreign language curriculum at the lower secondary level in a Central European country.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Educational opportunity and its fairness are conceptualized at many levels, starting from philosophical and legal approaches (Culp & Drerup, 2023). A focus on performance/outcomes is common, and regional differences in educational achievement and attainment have been intensively discussed globally,

and also in Czechia in recent years, in connection with the spatial turn (Fuller & Löw, 2017). Results achieved in international-large scale assessments such as PISA (Czech School Inspectorate, 2022; OECD, 2017) are the typical lens.

While the requirement for equity of outcomes may be a maximalist concept, equality of access to various learning inputs or environments is perceived as a minimalist requirement. In this sense, geographically oriented studies in particular focus on spatial inequalities in the availability of schools or qualifications of various types and/or of different quality (Bueno & Bonal, 2023), using concepts of supply of schooling or learning opportunities that differ depending on the place where a student lives (Bonal, 2025; Grant, 2022; Perry & Southwell, 2014). The interaction of institutional, social and geographical factors creates a hierarchy of spaces. So far, most research has focused primarily on how spaces within cities are differentiated, and where striking manifestations of spatial (in)justice such as ghettoisation can be found. Rural and peripheral spaces are less studied (Bernard, 2018).

Of course, the place of residence contributes to the creation or increase of inequalities not only through the availability of schools and programs, but also through the unequal distribution of cultural and social capital of the local community – this is why it is sometimes referred to as spatial capital or neighbourhood effect on educational outcomes (Silva, 2024, 2025). Spatial capital depends also on how space is perceived, what meanings are attributed to it and how it is formed, and conversely how space itself forms the identities of students and their families.

Out of this complex web of spatial educational equity and equality, access to curriculum is topic of this study. The concept of curriculum is pervasive in educational sciences, the dark side of which is number of different operationalisations. In a simplified way, a distinction can be made between a broad approach to curriculum as all the experiences of the student in school, and a narrower approach, according to which curriculum is a project of educational goals and contents. In this second sense, one often speaks of intended (written) curriculum (Marsh, 2004). In this study, the curricular opportunity will be operationalised by the language subjects available in a school.

Geography of curriculum opportunities is a relatively under-researched area and previous work has focused mainly on upper secondary schools and a few mainly English-speaking countries (Dean et al., 2023; Grant, 2022; Perry & Southwell, 2014). Here we address the geography of opportunities for foreign language learning in lower secondary school, i.e. for students in early adolescence. Arguments for foreign language learning can be primarily economic (school should prepare for jobs), or more humanistic and academic – learning a foreign language is an important way to learn about different cultures. From the perspective of lifelong learning, foreign language knowledge significantly facilitates the mobility of young people during their study course and expands the possibilities of school graduates to find employment on the labour market. In this way, language instruction mitigates the negative effects of family background and contributes to reducing inequalities in education.

Context

Modernity's educational projects often aimed at the mental unification of the population of nation states and therefore preferred a decontextualized curriculum not accounting for local specificities (Barthes et al.,

2018). This certainly included the ethos of a fair approach to education. The education systems in most countries under communist rule, as a specific case of modernization, were characterized by a high degree of centralization and standardization. At the turn of the 1940s and 1950s, the communist government in the then socialist Czechoslovakia eliminated the previous differences between different types of schools providing initial general education (including differences between urban and rural schools) and created a comprehensive school model with a uniform curriculum that was applied in all schools throughout the country (Novotný et al., 2023). The compulsory foreign language taught in all comprehensive schools was Russian, which was generally unpopular (Judt, 2006). Other foreign languages at this level were only extra-curricular options (if any).

However, since the 1960s, few elite schools have been established where other modern foreign languages (mainly German or English) were also taught as a compulsory subject besides the Russian language. In 1965, the Ministry of Education and Culture (1965) reported that schools with such “extended” foreign language teaching were operating in three districts (boroughs) of Prague and in fifteen other cities. These were the capitals of the regions and some other major towns (in Czechia – Kladno, Tábor, Liberec and Uherské Hradiště; in Slovakia – Prešov). Despite all the political upheavals in the following decades, the network of these schools was maintained, roughly corresponding in number of districts plus capital boroughs (in 1989 there were 90 such schools in Czechia, with just over 2% of students being educated in them). Foreign language other than Russian as part of the compulsory curriculum was therefore available only to a small group of students in urban schools. Students from the catchment areas of regular schools could apply to the elite schools, and, if they were accepted, they had to commute.

The general transformation processes of society and economy after the fall of the communist government and the liberalization of education brought or reinforced spatial differences between the contents of education (curriculum), processes and conditions in schools, and student outcomes.

Today, lower secondary education in Czechia is still mainly provided in comprehensive “basic” schools, two-thirds of which combine primary and lower secondary grades. This model is similar to school systems in the Nordic countries of Europe, for example. In addition, however, lower secondary programs are also open in about three hundred elite exam-entrance schools, called “multi-year grammar schools” (in Czech – víceleté gymnázium, VG). At the lower secondary level, elite exam-entrance schools are attended by 10% of students, while comprehensive schools account for the remaining 90%, although this proportion differs significantly between cities and villages.

The current situation, where lower secondary education is provided to Czech students in a large number of comprehensive schools often maintained even in small municipalities, leads to the fact that the number of lower secondary students in a typical comprehensive school is very small compared to Western countries, especially in rural schools: most often it is one just class per Grade 6 to 9. This effectively limits the school's ability to offer broad range of elective subjects.

Czech education policy pursues the European “Mother Tongue + 2” policy (Arvidsson & Jemstedt, 2022). The application of this principle differs somewhat in countries where multiple distinct languages are used

and in the relatively linguistically homogeneous nation states of Europe. In Czechia, this practically means that a student takes one foreign language (usually English) from primary grades. In lower secondary school, student is obliged to start studying another one – we will refer to it as Other Foreign Language (OFL). The choice of OFL is limited by the rule that it must be English unless the student is learning it as their first foreign language. Although schools are obliged to include OFL in the curriculum from the Grade 8 at the latest, most schools start teaching OFL in the Grade 7. The study of an additional (third) foreign language as an optional subject is underrepresented and unevenly available.

“Mother Tongue + 2” policy can lead to a somewhat mechanical view of the presence of languages in school. Janík and Janíková (2022) remind that real-live experiences with languages in school are significantly richer, among other things due to the increasing language diversity of students. Nevertheless, such language experiences take place within frames of language and curricular policy. Therefore, it remains important to deal with the official curriculum available in individual schools.

Spatial patterns of educational phenomena in Czechia often show a typical picture, with districts in northwestern Bohemia deviating negatively (Czech School Inspectorate, 2022). In the northwestern peripheral, mountainous or industrial regions of Karlovy Vary and Ústí and Labem the negative phenomena associated with the transformation to a post-industrial and post-carbon economy are accumulating. Two types of peripheries can be found here: 1) industrial regions affected by transformation and decarbonization (formerly referred to as the Most and Sokolov coal basins); 2) remote borderland areas in the Ore Mountains and some spurs (Aš, Šluknov). What both types of landscape have in common is the persistent consequences of the expulsion of the German population and subsequent resettlement including the high share of minorities as Roma (Dvořák et al., 2021).

3 MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research design of this study is census-type analysis based on administrative data on all relevant students and schools from the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports of the Czech Republic (hereinafter Ministry of Education) and a questionnaire survey of students and teachers conducted by the Czech School Inspectorate.

To determine curricular opportunity in individual schools, we used administrative data from individual student records, or student registers (hereinafter referred to as the register). The register is maintained by all primary and secondary schools (with the exception of schools in hospitals and other health facilities) as mandated by the Education Act (Act 561/2004 Coll.), which in Section 28 sets out the scope of recorded data, which includes, among other things, data on the language of instruction and what other languages the student is learning. The Ministry of Education

aggregates data from registers at the school level and makes them available to researchers. Schools submit data to the ministry twice a year. The data we work with is from the „autumn“ set as of September 30, 2022. We chose this date because it corresponded to the school year in which the survey described below was conducted. School funding (per capita) has been linked to the school registry data, so schools and the ministry paid attention to its management, and in present research this was reflected in the fact that the data did not need further cleaning. From a legal point of view, anonymized data are used so some ethical barriers here do not apply. A significant limitation, however, is the absence of some individual information in the register (e.g. on the social background of the students).

For description on the quality of language teaching and other relevant experiences of students, we used data from a questionnaire survey on foreign language teaching conducted by the Czech School Inspectorate in the 2022/2023 school year in schools that were selected for the inspection survey in that year (this is about one sixth of all Czech schools of the corresponding type). The survey was administered electronically to Grade 9 students, and also to students of the corresponding grades of multi-year grammar schools and their teachers (Tab. 1). The inspection is authorized by law for this type of activity and the dataset was anonymous (Dvořák et al., 2023).

The data were further aggregated to the level of municipalities and districts (in Czech: okres) using data from the school register and visualized using the RCzechia package (Lacko, 2023).

4 RESULTS

First, we will present several general characteristics of language teaching (based on Dvořák et al., 2023), and then we will describe in more detail the variability of curricular opportunities depending on spatial factors.

The OFLs taught in lower secondary schools can be divided into three groups. Almost 90% of students study either German or Russian. The share of students learning French or Spanish (or English, because they have a different first foreign language) is 10% in total. Finally, only a quarter of a percent of students learn Italian, Polish, Slovak, Ukrainian or Hebrew. The least represented OFLs reported by schools are Chinese, Japanese and Korean.

The conditions, process and outcomes of teaching OFL in comprehensive schools mostly show less favourable characteristics than in multi-year grammar schools. As a result of the different composition of students in both types of schools, educational inequalities conditioned by the socio-cultural environment in which the students live are reproduced.

The vast majority of students report the perceived usefulness of OFL. However, only a minority of students report that they would choose this subject if they did not have to (the exception is English

Tab. 1. Participants in the questionnaire survey

Language	Students			Teachers		
	total	comprehensive schools	grammar schools	total	comprehensive schools	grammar schools
English	4,633	3,357	1,276	306	197	109
German	10,192	8,528	1,664	1,204	808	396
French	629	218	411	162	45	117
Spanish	993	413	580	143	56	87

Source: Czech School Inspectorate (Dvořák et al., 2023)

Tab. 2. Distribution of schools and municipalities by the number of foreign languages taught

Languages taught	Schools		Municipalities		
	number	share (%)	number	share (%)	average size (thousand inhabitants)
1	67	2.6	-	-	-
2	1,375	54.1	851	62.1	2
3	831	32.7	357	26.0	5
4	229	9.0	99	7.2	14
5	34	1.3	40	2.9	46
6 or more	6	0.2	6	0.5	>100
Total	2,542	100,0	1,371	100	

Source: Author based on <https://edudata.msmt.gov.cz/> and <https://data.csu.gov.cz/>

as an OFL). Attitudes towards language learning and achievement of boys are systematically worse than those of girls. This trend is not specific to the Czech education system only but is also observed internationally. Students who are citizens of Ukraine and Belarus learn Russian as a OFL more often than the average for all students.

In comprehensive schools, the possibility of including more than two foreign languages in the curriculum is rarely used. At least three foreign languages are taken just by about half a percent of students in comprehensive schools. In some cases, however, the additional OFL classes may in fact be just more classes of English or the second foreign language.

Table 2 shows the number of foreign languages taught in schools and municipalities of various sizes. (We do not consider municipalities in which there is no school of a given type). The small number of cases where only one language is taught usually represent schools that do not have the full grade span yet (e.g. newly established schools) and we will not consider them further.

Given that one of the foreign languages is always mandatory English, it is obvious that in most schools only one foreign language other than English is taught.

The proportion of municipalities where only one language other than English is taught is even higher. This shows that even where there are two or more schools in smaller municipalities, these schools do not offer complementary languages or compete with each other in terms of language curriculum. An extreme case can be considered, for example, the district centre Znojmo (about 35 thousand inhabitants), with six comprehensive schools, all of which teach only German besides of English. Analogously, in the entire district of Český Krumlov, there are a total of 18 schools, all of which teach only English and German.

Let us look at this aspect more systematically. Typical spatial patterns of educational phenomena in the Czechia were described in previous sections: districts in northwestern Bohemia deviating negatively (e.g., Czech School Inspectorate, 2022). Figure 1, however, shows a somewhat different situation. Here the “small districts” (in Czech: *správní obvody obcí s rozšířenou působností*) are used as a unit of analysis because it can be considered the hypothetical local educational market – largest area within which an early adolescent student could choose a school teaching their preferred second foreign language (in terms of commuting options). Then, students in some peripheral “small districts” (in particular along the southwestern and southern borders of Bohemia and Moravia) have minimal or no choice of foreign language learned. So, in many areas, a student would have to attend a school a considerable distance away (or apply for selective multi-year grammar school) to be able to learn a language other than the two most

widely taught OFL.

As expected, the widest offer is in the capital Prague and a few other largest cities. However, the number of students actually studying some languages may be very small. Since we know that in most schools the second language is German or Russian, the ratio of students studying Russian and German in individual districts (Fig. 2) can be calculated. In both the eastern and western parts of the country, German is dominant in the districts bordering Germany and Austria, which is also true in the capital Prague and its suburbia. On the other hand, a higher proportion of Russian is taught in the ring of districts located at a greater distance around Prague – this area is often referred to as the inner periphery, lying on the border between regions. The second large area where many schools teach Russian is the northeast of Czechia, i.e. the districts bordering Poland and Slovakia (in other words, further away from German-speaking countries) or landlocked and not bordering any foreign state.

Quality of Language Instruction

Moving to the broader concept of curriculum, it also includes what teaching looks like and what resources are available to students (Priestley, 2025). Table 3 shows that multi-year grammar school students are much more likely to be taught by a native speaker for a significant period of time. However, this type of school is only present in urban environments and for some students from remote rural communities is practically inaccessible by public transport (Bernard et al., 2024). Similar spatial inequalities in the availability of selective secondary schools also exist in other Central European countries (Dolata et al., 2025).

In comprehensive schools, a quarter of students learning Spanish, or 19% of students learning English as OFL, reported that they had been taught by a native speaker for at least one semester, as compared with only 8% of students learning German. This means that although German is the most widely taught OFL, the availability of native speakers is limited. Interestingly, this disparity was not observed in the case of Russian.

Similarly, apart from English, most students have not yet used OFL that they learn at school in their everyday lives. Students in comprehensive schools have significantly fewer chances of participating in a school-organised visit to a country where the OFL they are studying is spoken than students in multi-year grammar schools. Here again, and surprisingly, this also applies to German-speaking countries (although to a lesser extent than for French and Spanish). The mere geographical proximity of the country where a language is spoken therefore does not in many cases lead to the opportunity to get to visit it (Fig. 3 – data is missing for Russian. Due to the political situation at the time of the survey – Russian aggression against Ukraine – the corresponding questionnaires for Russian were not administered).

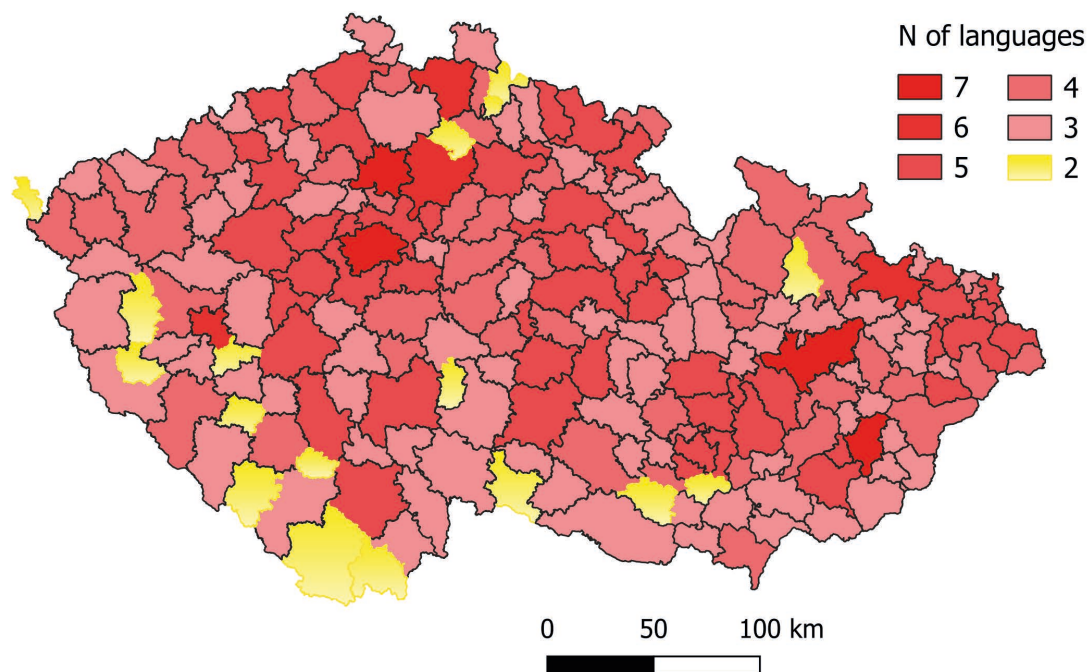


Fig. 1. Number of other foreign languages taught in “small” districts of Czechia, autumn 2022

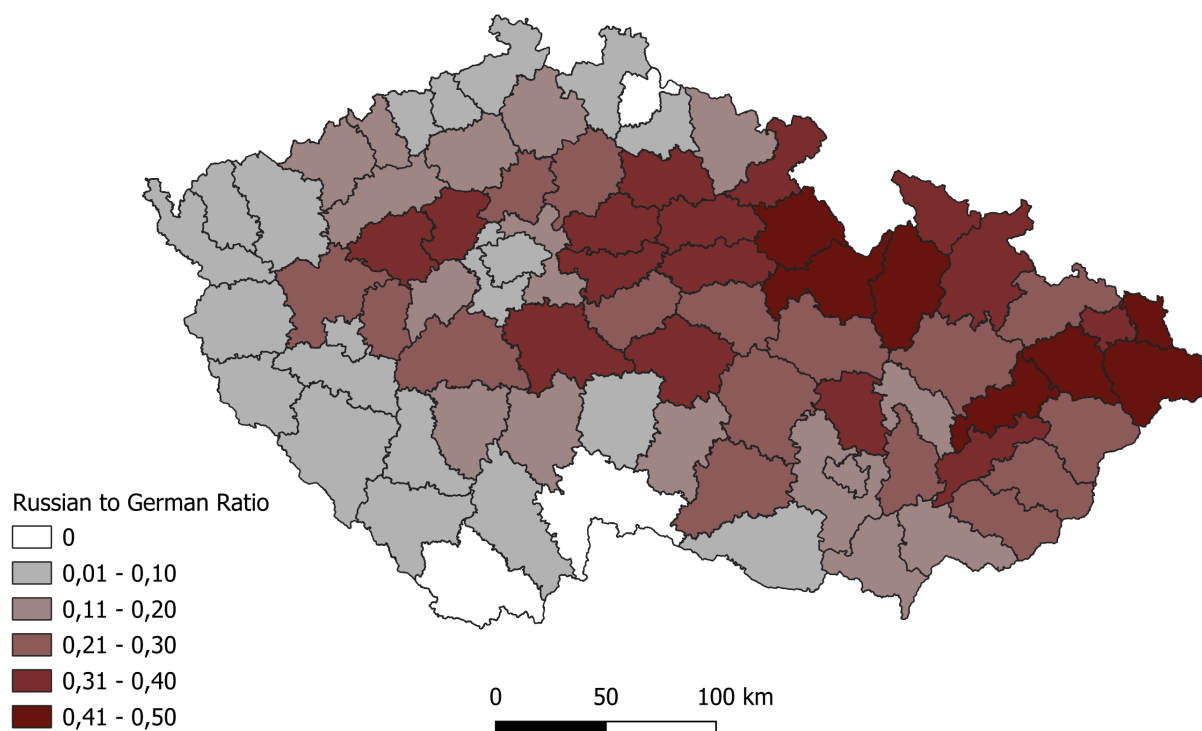


Fig. 2. Ratio of students learning Russian and German in Czech districts, autumn 2022

Tab. 3. Participation of native speaker in instruction

School type	N	Native speaker in instruction (%)				total
		never	seldom	regularly	NA	
German language						
Selective (grammar)	119	71.4	12.6	14.3	1.7	100.0
Comprehensive	435	92.4	2.5	3.4	1.6	100.0
Russian language						
Selective (grammar)	46	78.3	6.5	15.2	0.0	100.0
Comprehensive	136	80.9	8.1	11.0	0.0	100.0

Source: Dvořák et al. (2023)

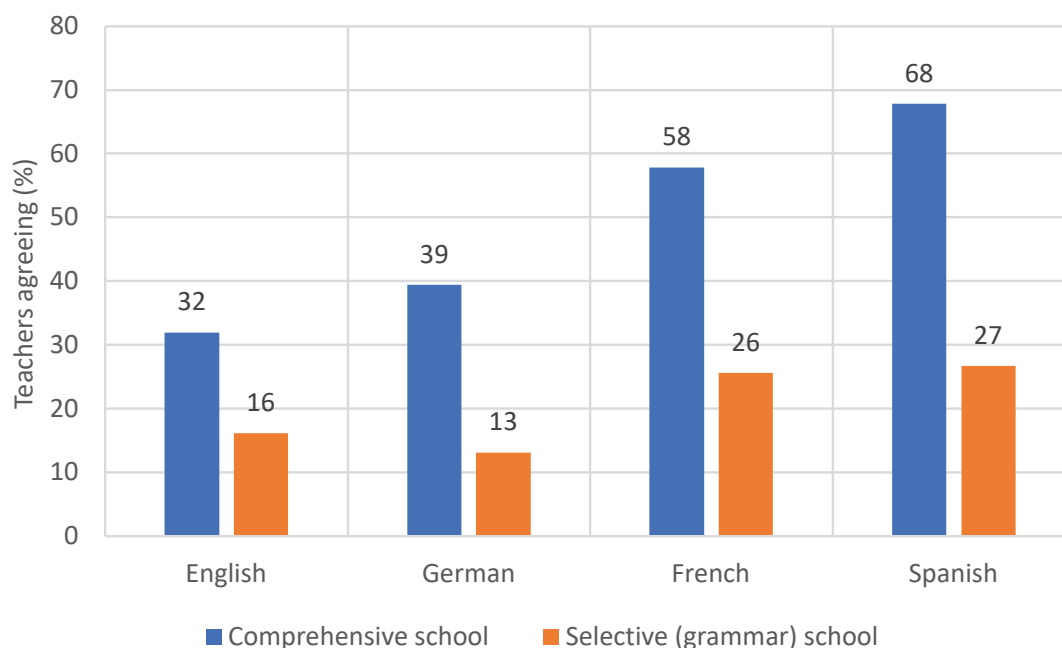


Fig. 3. Proportion of positive answers to the question: “Students in my classes do not have the opportunity to travel to a country where the language they are learning as OFL is spoken as part of an event organized by the school”

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results demonstrate several mechanisms by which spatial factors influence foreign language curriculum opportunities in Czech compulsory education. As we expected, one of the factors is the size of the municipality in which the school is located, with the size of the school as the mediator. The offer of foreign languages outside cities and towns is limited mainly to Russian and German (and of course English).

However, in some places the relative geographical position of the school’s municipality (in relation to neighbouring states) appears to be even more significant. This influence is strongest near the border with Austria and in the neighbourhood of the economically developed and socially stabilised Bavaria as an „old“ federal state of Germany. This influence is less significant near the border of the „new“ federal state of Saxony. It would be interesting to further analyse whether the lower attractiveness of the labour market in Saxony plays a role here. A second possible explanation may be the differences in the structure of settlements and population in the northern and southern border regions of Czechia.

On the other hand, the existence of a long border with Poland does not lead to the teaching of Polish as foreign language (We do not consider schools with Polish as the language of instruction that serve the indigenous Polish minority in two districts in the northeast of the Czechia – Czech Silesia). The same is true in areas bordering Slovakia, but the proximity of the Czech and Slovak languages may also play a role here.

The third factor that we can infer is peripherality, especially in the inner peripheries, where the level of teaching of Russian remains higher than that of German. However, it is not clear whether curriculum opportunities in these areas are driven by supply (there is a lack of teachers of other languages in peripheral areas) or demand – for example, parents or school operators do not create pressure for schools to replace Russian with another language. The perceived association of Russian with the imperial behaviour

of the Soviet Union and later with direct military occupation has greatly reduced the attractiveness of this language, despite the fact that as a Slavic language it was generally more accessible to Czechs. The Cyrillic alphabet has always been a barrier, too. The fact that Russian is often perceived as a relic of the past is also shown by the findings that Russian teachers have the highest average age of all teachers of all subjects, 52.6 years (English teachers – 44.7; German teachers – 47.6; Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports, 2025). However, it is possible that the degree of these negative attitudes towards Russian is also not evenly distributed across space.

On a European scale (with exception of multilingual countries like Switzerland or Finland), not only Russian but all foreign languages except English are perceived as of little relevance today (Judt, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2020). But it seems that there are some special cases, at least in the school curriculum. In Czech border regions, employment abroad in Austria or Bavaria, in local branches of German companies, or even long-term out-migration, is both a coping mechanism and a status issue. Such attitudes increase the prestige of German language in the eyes of local residents, but education can be reduced to its pragmatic, economic function in servitude to the labour market. There is also some evidence that even Czech students studying German prefer to communicate in English when in contact with their peers in Germany.

Curricular opportunities shall also be considered in a broader sense, encompassing not only the availability of a particular school subject (in this case an OFL), but also related experiences such as the opportunity to visit a country where the language is spoken. We then see that spatial and social factors interact, as students in selective (grammar) schools always have better opportunities and experiences than students in comprehensive schools. At the same time, selective (grammar) schools are more accessible in urban environments and to families with higher socioeconomic status (Straková & Greger, 2018). Existence of multi-year grammar schools in Czechia

do not improve the availability of broad language education in remote rural municipalities.

This study confirmed the existence of spaces within Czechia whose residents are disadvantaged in access to broad curriculum, quality teaching and other important educational experiences. Similarly to previous research (Dean et al., 2023), our study shows that schools located in rural, remote and peripheral areas have a limited offer of languages taught, where in addition there may be a combination of spatial and socioeconomic disadvantage. It might be expected that in certain places, young people have limited choice in education as a form of public service, but this study suggests that emerging spatial barriers in access to curriculum differ in some respects from typical patterns of regional educational inequalities described so far for Czechia.

Robertson (2021) pointed out that if we remain only stating spatial inequalities, we can contribute to maintaining or even creating new exclusion (so-called cold spots as places where something is not going well). Quantitative approach used in this paper does not explain “how” social processes influencing intended curriculum, relations and results/outputs are mediated through the governance of the state, municipalities, structural factors and the “school” market. At the same time, it can lead to the application of overly metro-centric values that do not take into account the local perspectives, experiences, and needs of students and communities. It is therefore necessary to build further on the results of this study in at least two directions: to supplement them with qualitative studies explaining the mechanisms, and to use them to influence educational and regional policy, which the final paragraphs address.

Municipalities that are operators of lower secondary comprehensive schools, in cooperation with other partners (non-profit organizations, etc.), should seek resources and opportunities to support students who are disadvantaged spatially (rural, peripheral locations) or by the socio-cultural environment in which they live, and, for example, enable them to participate in school-organized visits to countries where the language they are studying at school is spoken. This would help compensate for some inequalities and could increase student motivation to learn the foreign languages and more generally to build a better relationship with school and perceive the value of formal education.

At the national level, there is only minimal opportunity in the Czech lower secondary schools to study non-European languages. It is of course true that European languages are the mother tongue or official language in many other parts of the world. With regard to the current multipolar world and the desirable diversity of economic and cultural ties of Czechia, however, there should be a discussion about expanding the offer of non-European or even not yet represented European foreign languages.

Besides, it would be appropriate to provide students with a migration background with the opportunity to maintain contact with the country and culture of their ancestors through the formal study of language of their family. The same consideration could also be applied to autochthonous minorities, such as the Roma (Woods et al., 2025). In addition, a major curriculum review was underway in Czechia in recent years, including the plan to limit the range of OFL in compulsory schools to three since 2034 (Russian to be completely eliminated). It is not yet known whether this proposal can survive the recent change of education ministers.

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