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ANALYSIS OF FACTORS IN THE COMPETITIVENESS OF RURAL SCHOOLS IN LATGALE REGION: THE RESULTS OF AN EXPERT SURVEY

Sandis Sprudzans[1], Mg.paed.; **Anda Zvaigzne**[2], Dr.oec.; **Olga Senkane**[3], Dr.philol.

[1,2,3]Rezekne Academy of Technologies

Abstract. At the stage of fast progress in modern technologies and science, it is essential to respond in time to prospects emerging for the future. Global economic trends show a fast reorientation towards the creation of higher value-added products. Therefore, one of the most important factors in the ability to respond to changes in the economic environment in Latvia in a timely manner is the capacity to provide quality education to youth who will be able to compete in the world market, cope with challenges and achieve the goals set. In recent years in Latvia, the national education system has been one of the most urgent areas of national domestic policy, in which reforms have been implemented to increase the competitiveness thereof. The research aims to identify and analyse factors in the competitiveness of rural schools in Latgale region to determine measures to be taken to increase the competitiveness thereof by employing the expert interview method. The results of the expert survey revealed that the competitiveness of rural schools in Latgale region was most significantly affected by the quality of administrative and teaching personnel, as well as their ability to plan and evaluate their school development. The highest priority rating was given to raising the qualifications of teaching personnel and improving the curriculum, which indicates their significant impact on the competitiveness of rural schools in Latgale region. The research novelty involves examining in depth the known and identifying new factors in the competitiveness of rural schools in Latgale region. Research methods used: monographic and descriptive, analysis, syntheses, statistical analysis, a sociological research method – an expert survey. The research was based on the results of an expert survey, research papers and other sources of information.

Key words: Latgale region, rural schools, factors in competitiveness.
JEL code: R00; O18; I25

Introduction

Research studies by Shikalepo show that providing high-quality and accessible education in rural communities is a global challenge (Shikalepo, 2020). Over the last twenty years in Latvia, a significant problem has arisen in the field of education because of a decrease in the number of rural residents and education system reforms. Currently, the reforms are focused on the optimization of the school network, which envisages closing many schools not meeting the criteria, mostly in rural areas, in the nearest future (LETA, 2023).

Arsen et al. (2021) have found that policies aimed at improving schools often exacerbate the problems faced by rural schools. Rural school principals actively seek ways to adapt the policy context to the needs of their schools and communities, despite significant challenges in this process (Arsen et al., 2021). Therefore, it is essential that the educational reforms implemented at the national level do not create unequal preconditions for competition between regional schools and national urban educational institutions, given the fact that each educational institution faces specific challenges. The problem with the number of educatees is particularly important in rural schools in the context of reforms.

Auers et al. (2019) have found that although the optimization of the school network could potentially reduce administrative costs and contribute to an increase in teacher salaries, the most important aspect is an analysis of the results of the educational process after such a reorganization. The restructuring of the education system should not only lead to a more financially efficient use of resources but also improve or at least retain the level of learning achievements of educatees (Auers et al., 2019).

Rural depopulation and communities with declining populations represent a challenge to many European regions (Skola laukos, 2016). A study by the Ministry of Education and Science has concluded

[1] E-mail: ss06015@edu.rta.lv
[2] E-mail: Anda.Zvaigzne@rta.lv
[3] E-mail: Olga.Senkane@rta.lv

that over a longer period, the number of educational institutions tended to gradually decrease and adapt to demographic trends; however, considering demographic forecasts, the number of educational institutions is also going to be reduced in the future (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023). Therefore, competition between the educational institutions is going to increase. All the challenges also affect the competitiveness of rural schools in Latgale region.

Svagzdiene (2017) has emphasized that a community that successfully provides services can attract and retain residents while meeting the needs of community members and promoting stability there. Accordingly, high-quality education services are critically important for increasing the competitiveness of rural areas (Svagzdiene & Perkumiene, 2017).

The recent global financial crisis has aroused discussions on how to measure school effectiveness and the quality of the results, balancing economic performance with humanistic pedagogy and the right to access education. In the rural areas of Latvia, schools with a relatively small number of educatees are traditionally widespread; however, in terms of economic performance, the schools have been apparently "expensive". Moreover, given recent changes in the public funding model, increased migration, demographic disparities and the impact of the financial crisis with a severe reduction in educational expenditure, the situation in small schools is extremely critical, and it is increasingly difficult for municipalities to maintain schools. After a wave of school closures in the period 2008-2009, according to public data, in the school year 2013/14 about a third of all schools in Latvia had fewer than 100 educatees, most of whom (255) lived in small settlements in rural areas (Tuna, 2014).

Supule (2019) has established that research studies on rural schools and local communities in many European countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland and the United Kingdom) and other countries such as the USA, Canada or Australia revealed various aspects of interaction between schools and local communities (Supule, 2019).

Despite the fact that schools in Latvia have historically been a centre of local significance for communities, this experience was lost and had to be re-gained. Traditionally, there is a perception in society that schools represent formal education; in many cases, parents are quite reluctant to visit schools because it might lead to unpleasant conversations for them. Other community members see no reason to visit schools. However, rules and practices in schools are based on an assumption that schools are for teachers, and educatees have limited access to facilities and infrastructure during the teaching-learning process that is fully controlled by school administrations and teachers. As a result, this means that the local community has little information about the school, resources are not used effectively, and in a situation of insufficient funding, the maintenance of the school seems very expensive (Tuna, 2014).

Supporters of maintaining rural schools usually draw attention to the positive role of schools in rural communities. A rural school is perceived as the centre of a civic society, 'the shining beacon' of a community and the last public service available in a village (Supule, 2019). Taking care of education for their residents is one of the autonomous functions of local governments. The role of local governments is particularly important at the stage of preschool and primary education, which is delivered as close as possible to the places of residence of the educatees. If viewing the educational process as the build-up of internationally competitive human capital, local governments should be actively involved at all stages of education. For example, the capability of local governments to cooperate with potential investors or local entrepreneurs, thereby helping to find and prepare the necessary specialists for the labour market, can be crucial for creating and maintaining a dynamic local economy. However, an effective national system is needed at this level, giving municipalities the legitimate and financial capacity to be active players while keeping in mind that the municipalities represent only one of the actors whose role mainly relates to effective cooperation.

Nevertheless, municipalities are the main providers of public services and are responsible for their quality at the initial stage of education (Auers et al., 2019).

Research hypothesis: the effective administration of rural schools, the qualifications of teaching personnel and the compliance of curricula with the needs of the rural community are the main factors contributing to the competitiveness of rural schools in Latgale region.

The research aims to identify and analyse factors in the competitiveness of rural schools in Latgale region to determine measures to be taken to increase the competitiveness thereof by employing the expert interview method.

Specific research tasks: 1) to review the theoretical literature on rural schools and the concept of competitiveness thereof; 2) to conduct a survey of education experts to obtain data on factors in the competitiveness of rural schools in Latgale region; 3) to draw conclusions and, based on the expert survey data, identify the main measures to be taken to increase the competitiveness of rural schools in Latgale region. **Research methods used:** monographic and descriptive, analysis, syntheses, statistical analysis, a sociological research method – an expert survey.

The research was based on the results of the expert survey and a review of research papers and other sources of information. The sources gave an insight into problems with school competitiveness and education quality in various countries, with special emphasis on the specifics of rural schools.

Research results and discussion

An important aspect of the present research is the location of a school. It is essential to have an explanation and understanding of the concept of a rural school in the relevant context and set proper criteria for competitiveness. A methodology (classifications and typologies) developed by Eurostat was used to objectively compare populated areas in Latvia to analyse the school network and identify how schools are classified by location. A Eurostat classification – DEGURBA – describes the labour market, education, living conditions, welfare and tourism in various populated areas. Based on the population size and the population density thresholds, it classifies local administrative units into seven types of areas. However, the present research needs a classification adapted to the situation in Latvia, which is based on DEGURBA and combines the seven types into three broader types considering the population size as well as migration and infrastructure, i.e. areas where education can be delivered: cities, dense towns and small towns (DEGURBA 1-3); suburban or peri-urban areas and villages (DEGURBA 4-5), dispersed rural areas and mostly uninhabited areas (DEGURBA 6-7) (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023).

Elsewhere in the world, the theoretical literature refers to "rural" schools as schools in a rural community, small town or town of less than 50000 inhabitants that is not a suburb of a city. This indicates significant differences between urban and rural areas, as well as the challenges faced by the education system. It is considered that other priorities are relevant to the development planning of rural schools compared with large urban schools. This was also found by a research study by Boix, Champollion and Duarte stating that, in addition to this general characteristic, rural contexts are also characterized by diversity, as rural communities are unique in terms of their values and opportunities (Boix et al., 2015). This means that rural schools have a kind of uniqueness, and young people have opportunities to shape their social-civic attitudes and participate in the further development of rural areas. A rural school is the foundation where a sense of belongingness and patriotism is formed. In this context and culture, as stated in the mentioned research study, a rural school is an active member of the institutional territorial system – a member that participates in the symbiosis of various members and provides efficiency and equality to

the social group in which it is integrated (Boix et al., 2015). However, the opportunities given by rural schools vary, depending on several factors that affect the functioning of the schools.

Regardless of whether rurality is defined entirely in demographic terms, the field of rural education has been engaged in coming to grips with the difference rural location and identification make to education. Therefore, the challenge is to conduct research that examines the complex meaning and impact of rurality in education rather than simply inserting it as a variable into generic research (Corbett, d'Entremont, 2024).

An analysis of the number of educational institutions and educatees in the academic year 2022/2023 by level of urbanization in Latvia revealed that the largest disparities were specific to rural areas and mostly uninhabited areas. Of the total, 36.8% educatees went to school in rural areas and mostly uninhabited areas, yet it is the rural and mostly uninhabited areas where the largest number of general primary and secondary educational institutions are located, accounting for 61.5% of the total educational institutions. A study by the Ministry of Education and Culture states that special attention should be paid to primary schools, as 10.8% of the total educatees were in education in rural and mostly uninhabited areas, while primary education was delivered by 34.5% educational institutions (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023).

Table 1

Comparison of indicators of the education system between rural and urban primary and secondary schools in Latvia in the academic year 2022/2023

Indicator	Primary schools	Secondary schools
Proportion of educational institutions		
Rural areas	34.50%	55.00%
Urban areas	65.50%	45.00%
Disparity	-31.00%	10.00%
Proportion of educatees		
Rural areas	10.80%	33.00%
Urban areas	89.20%	67.00%
Disparity	-78.40%	-34.00%
Average number of educatees per institution		
Rural areas	120	416
Urban areas	411	874
Disparity	-291	-458
Average class size		
Rural areas	14	16
Urban areas	24	27
Disparity	-10	-11

Source: authors' calculations based on Ministry of Education and Science data, 2023.

The disparity is particularly significant at the primary school level, as 10.8% of the total educatees went to school in rural areas, while primary education was delivered by 34.5% educational institutions (Table 1) (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023).

This indicates an irrational distribution of financial resources within the education system. In many schools, the total number of educatees is small, whereas the cost of maintaining the schools is high. Concerning the prospects, it could be concluded that the number of schools in rural areas is going to continue decreasing because population natural change is negative, and the population in rural areas tend to decrease. Auers et al. (2019) found that the performance of rural schools in Latvia, especially in Latgale

region, consistently lagged behind the national average, with significant disparities in both the results of national examinations and the international evaluation programme, thereby emphasising the dependence of access to high-quality education on the place of residence and the kind of school and indicating the need for systemic reforms in the education sector to increase regional competitiveness and reduce the disparity.

The competitiveness of a rural school depends on many factors that affect the quality of education. They could be both internal and external. Researchers have acknowledged that increasing the level of school competition has been proposed as a way to improve school performance (Harrison & Rouse, 2014).

To analyse criteria for the competitiveness of rural schools, first of all, it is important to understand what shapes the quality of schools. One of the main factors is the quality of education. The quality of education involves the educational process, curricula, the learning environment and administration, which provide everyone with an inclusive education and the opportunity to achieve high-quality results in accordance with the goals set by society and the State (Education Law, 1998). The mentioned characteristic of the quality of education closely relates to the criteria of competitiveness. The quality of education is an essential factor in competitiveness.

Some research studies have found that rural schools and their curricula are affected by many factors. A large component is the disadvantage faced by rural schools and their educatees. Rural schools receive relatively less funding, which affects the level of technology and technological sophistication available to educatees in the rural areas. Secondary school completion and participation in higher education also tend to be lower in rural areas than in urban and suburban areas. In addition, large-scale series of assessments of the performance of students such as PISA and TIMSS as well as national and regional assessments usually indicate lower levels of measured academic skills and achievements in rural areas. However, some research studies have found that most of these differences in skills and achievement disappear when controls for socioeconomic status are included (Corbett, d'Entremont, 2024).

Educational theory refers to several factors in school competitiveness, as evidenced by the number of schools. The availability of more schools increases the possibility of school choice and consequently generates competitive pressure from the market, which leads schools to seek better results. International literature on school choice indicates that it depends on factors such as: income, school quality, safety, parental education and distance from the student's home to the educational institution (Lazaretti & Franca, 2020). Lazaretti & Franca (2020) have summarized the theoretical literature showing that school quality is an important factor in students' choices. Schools seek better results to keep their students, otherwise the most productive schools overlap with lower productivity schools. However, school competitiveness can lead to positive or negative outcomes in schools, the direction of impact depends on the design of public policies that raise competition (Lazaretti & Franca, 2020).

A research study used an economic model of school performance as an assessment of school competitiveness to estimate the relative efficiency of sampled schools. The model uses school resources and student characteristics, related to students' motivation and ability to learn, as the inputs to the education production process and student academic achievement as the output. Studies have used a variety of measures for both inputs and outputs. School resource variables have been measured using teacher quantity and/or quality measures, e.g., the number of teachers, teacher experience or qualifications, and teacher/student ratios. In addition, measures of other school resources have been included to capture inputs such as books, equipment, and administrative support. A wide variety of measures related to student characteristics, reflecting family and peer background influences, have been used with most studies using multiple measures, often employing census data. These contextual variables have included household crowding, average family income, students from deprived backgrounds, students from single-parent

families, ethnicity and the educational level of parents. Output variables are almost exclusively measured using examination data, on the basis that success in examinations is valued by key stakeholders such as educators, parents and policy-makers (Harrison & Rouse, 2014).

The present research considered and rated the criterion of education quality, which captures six areas, as a primary criterion (Ozols, 2021). One of the areas is compliance with goals, which consists of several sub-criteria: competencies and learning achievements, continuation of education and employment, equality and inclusion. The next area concerns the learning environment, i.e. education quality: teaching and learning, educator professional capacity and implementation of educational programmes. The area of inclusive environment involves school accessibility for various groups, safety and psychological well-being, as well as appropriate infrastructure and resources. Good administration of the areas is also important, which involves administrative efficiency, professionalism, support and cooperation.

The size and location of a school affect many areas of education, including school characteristics, curricula and post-school outcomes. Research studies show that students in rural schools face many personal and educational challenges, from living in poverty to having less opportunity and sophistication in technology. Rural schools also have fewer course offerings. Although rural schools are unique, urban and rural schools may be more similar than expected, especially as compared to more affluent suburban areas. Rural and urban schools have higher levels of poverty and more dire financial situations, which affect the educational offerings, experiences and learning outcomes of their students (Bouck, 2004). The mentioned factors are characteristic of external competitiveness criteria related to funding and resources for rural schools. Rural schools often lack adequate funding and resources needed to deliver high-quality education. This includes both physical resources, e.g. buildings and teaching aids, and human resources, e.g. qualified teachers. Rural schools have difficulty in hiring and retaining qualified teachers, mainly because of lower salaries, limitations in professional development and more difficult living conditions in rural areas. Nowadays, the use of technologies in education has become an essential factor, yet rural schools often lack the necessary infrastructure and technological resources to effectively integrate the technologies into the learning process. In addition to the competitiveness of rural schools, wider socio-economic factors, e.g. the economic status of student families, can affect the students' ability to participate in the learning process and access additional educational resources.

As part of the research, an online survey was conducted in February 2024, which involved rural school principals and education experts (Table 2). The purpose of the survey was to identify expert opinions on factors affecting the competitiveness of rural schools in Latgale region. The total sample size was 16 respondents.

Table 2

Professional experience of the experts involved in the survey (n=16)

Position	Number of respondents	Length of service in education	Experience with rural schools
School principal	9	At least 20 years	Yes
Deputy school principal	4	At least 20 years	Yes
Teacher	1	At least 20 years	Yes
Specialist in education	1	At least 20 years	Yes
University teacher	1	At least 20 years	Yes

Source: authors' calculations based on the results of the expert survey

All the experts had at least 20 years of work experience in education, indicating a wide range of practical and theoretical knowledge. The average length of their service in education was 32.5 years. Most of the

experts had direct experience in working with the rural school system, which indicated their competence in assessing the educational competitiveness of rural areas. The present research, which focuses on the competitiveness of rural schools in terms of quality, performed a detailed analysis of the expert opinions based on systematized ratings of criteria. The analysis of the results of the survey made it possible to identify which aspects most effectively contributed to the quality of school performance and how they affected the capability of schools to compete in the field of education. The experts were asked to rate the criteria according to their relative importance, on a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 represented the highest priority and 10 the lowest one. High priority criteria (ranks 1-4) included: leadership and administration, personnel management, self-assessment and development planning, cooperation with parents, school as an educational organisation, safety and psychological well-being, the human-centred and people-oriented approach, teacher professional capacity, continuation of education and employment, competences and learning achievements as well as the hiring and retaining of qualified teachers. The criteria are considered essential for increasing the efficiency and adaptability of schools in the changing environment of the education sector. Medium priority criteria (ranks 5-7) emphasized financial and resource management, availability and effective use of material and technical resources, as well as support for educatees and compliance with the principles of equality and inclusion. These factors provide a solid foundation for high-quality education and support for educatees in the learning process. Low-priority criteria (ranks 8-10) included administrator and founder cooperation, location and external socioeconomic factors. Although the mentioned aspects might be important to the day-to-day operations of the school and its relationship with the local community, they were not considered crucial in the context of the educational quality of the school. The results of the research revealed that the competitiveness of rural schools in terms of quality was based on the competencies of school principals and teachers, as well as institutional and social systems that contributed to the development and performance of educatees. However, it should be emphasized that the research represented the opinions of a limited group of experts, which means that the results might vary, depending on the specific educational and socioeconomic situation. Therefore, it is important to continue this research.

Each expert rated the four main measures, assigning them a rank from 1 to 5, where 1 meant the most important measure and 5 meant the least important measure. The measures proposed to increase the competitiveness of rural schools were as follows: improvements in curricula, teacher qualifications and experience, the school microclimate and social environment as well as material and technical resources. The survey data revealed that the experts attached the greatest importance to the development of curricula and teacher competencies. This leads to an assumption that high-quality education and capable teachers are the main factors that contribute to the competitiveness of the school and its capability to attract and retain educatees. However, improvements in the physical environment and material and technical support, although important, were considered to be less important than improvements in the quality of curricula and teaching. Arithmetic averages and coefficients of variation for each measure are presented in Table 3, giving an understanding of the coherence of expert opinions and how important they consider each measure to be for increasing the competitiveness of rural schools.

Table 3

Arithmetic averages for and the coherence of expert opinions on rural school competitiveness measures (n=16)

Competitiveness improvement measures	Arithmetic average	Coherence coefficient (%)
Curricula	1.75	47.38
Teacher professional development	1.56	55.28
School microclimate	1.94	59.04
Material and technical resources	1.94	42.67

Source: authors' calculations based on the results of the expert survey

The arithmetic average shows an average rank assigned by the experts to each measure. The survey results confirmed again that all four measures were considered important, with the lowest average rank being assigned to improvements in curricula and teacher professional development, which indicated their highest priority. The coefficient of coherence (coefficient of variation) shows the extent to which expert opinions vary on each measure (Stefenhagena, 2011). A lower coefficient indicates greater agreement between expert opinions. The lowest coefficient of coherence was found for improvements in material and technical resources (42.67%), which means that the expert opinions on this problem were relatively the same. The largest variation of opinions was found for improvements in the school microclimate and social environment (59.04%), which revealed significant differences in expert ratings. The analysis revealed that although all the measures were considered important for increasing the competitiveness of rural schools, the experts had the highest agreement about improvements in material and technical resources.

The experts identified several important additional factors that affected the competitiveness of rural schools and the quality of education in Latgale region, which are as follows. 1. Incorporating community traditions into the educational process: the close ties of rural schools with the surrounding community serve as a basis for strengthening local identity and cultural heritage. Learning the local traditions contributes to the sense of belongingness to the community and cultural value preservation. 2. Personalized lessons: smaller classes in rural schools provide an individual approach to each educatee, allowing the teacher to adapt the learning process to the needs and ability level of each schoolchild. Such an approach contributes to a higher quality of learning and emotional well-being. 3. Creating a positive microclimate: a supportive learning environment is crucial for increasing the motivation and working capacity of both educatees and teachers. A positive microclimate creates an atmosphere full of trust and cooperation, as well as strengthens the sense of belongingness of educatees. 4. Demographic trends: birth rates, changes in the number of educatees and children, as well as migration directly affect the capacity of schools and the demand for educational services. Understanding the demographic processes in the region allows for more effective planning of the learning process and sustainable development of schools. 5. The availability of resources: sufficient support personnel, modern material and technical resources and funding are critical for delivering high-quality education. The availability of resources affects the learning process, the quality of teacher work and learning opportunities for educatees. 6. The role of political will and support: national and local government support for the rural school system, which involves allocating the necessary resources and contributing to sustainable development, is a decisive factor in increasing the competitiveness of schools. Political will and a single rural policy contribute to prospects for rural schools. 7. Designing a special curriculum: programmes and activities, e.g. regional education or an art school branch, allow rural schools to stand out against other schools and attract children with specific interests. The special curriculum helps to increase the visibility and competitiveness of the school. The results of the expert survey revealed that in order to increase the quality and competitiveness of education in Latgale region, it is necessary to focus

on the incorporation of local values into the educational process, a personalized learning approach, the creation of a positive microclimate, as well as sufficient resources and political support. Such an approach would contribute to both improvements in the quality of education and the capability of rural schools to adapt to changing socioeconomic conditions.

The analysis and proposals made by the experts for increasing the competitiveness of schools, with special emphasis on rural schools, indicate the need to implement measures both at the school level and at the national level. The competitiveness of rural schools is significantly affected by external factors, e.g. a decrease in the intellectual potential of the population and a decrease in the quality of life, which cannot be solved only using the internal resources of the school.

1. **Individual support for educatees:**

- developing and implementing a differentiated approach strategy based on the individual abilities, interests and needs of each educatee;
- access to qualified teachers capable of giving support in both the academic and the social fields;
- expanding and promoting educational programmes of interest to contribute to personality development and the discovery of talents.

2. **Rural environment development:**

- stimulating the migration of new families to rural areas, the creation of jobs and improvements in the quality of life;
- improving the rural infrastructure and environment, thereby making the rural areas more attractive for living there.
- supporting businesses and private initiatives in rural areas.

3. **Creation of a positive image:**

- emphasizing the quality of education at rural schools and learning achievements at school contests and intellectual competitions, as well as interest education;
- informing the public about the opportunities and advantages of rural schools;
- contributing to a positive perception of rural schools as an important factor in social development.

4. **National level initiatives:**

- creating and implementing policies that contribute to improvements in the demographic situation in rural areas;
- developing the social sphere by improving living conditions for rural residents;
- providing adequate financial support to rural schools, guaranteeing access to high-quality education.

Improving the quality and competitiveness of rural schools requires an integrated approach that combines both specific internal school measures and broader national-level strategies. Such an approach not only contributes to increasing the quality of education but also positively affects the image of rural schools and fosters the overall development of rural areas.

Conclusions

1) The locations of schools and specifically the context of rural schools in Latvia are important factors that affect the composition and performance of the education system, including learning achievements and access to education. The methodology developed by Eurostat, which classifies populated areas according to various criteria, allows for an objective comparison of the areas, thereby helping to

understand the location impacts of rural schools on the quality and availability of education. This aspect is important for designing policies aimed at increasing the quality of education and equal access to education in all territories.

2) The competitiveness and quality of rural schools depend on many factors relating to not only the location and available resources of a school but also socioeconomic preconditions, the integration of technologies into the learning process and the qualifications of teaching personnel. Rural schools play a unique role in the development of the local community, thereby shaping the social and civic attitudes of young people, which are essential in the context of sustainable regional development. Therefore, it is important to carry out systemic reforms and provide adequate support to rural schools to improve their performance and deliver high-quality education for all educatees, regardless of where they live.

3) The results of the expert survey revealed that the competitiveness of rural schools in Latgale region was most significantly affected by the quality of administration and teaching personnel, as well as the capability to plan and assess school development. This emphasizes the role of competent leadership and teacher capacity in educatee development and the capability of the school to hire and retain qualified personnel.

4) The expert survey, in which each of the measures proposed to increase competitiveness was assigned a rank from 1 to 5, revealed that the highest priority rating was given to increasing the qualifications of teachers (arithmetic average = 1.56) and improving the curriculum (arithmetic average = 1.75), which indicated their significant impact on the competitiveness of rural schools.

5) The coefficient of coherence revealed relatively high agreement among the experts on the needed improvements in material and technical resources (42.67%), while the largest expert disagreement related to improvements in the school microclimate and social environment (59.04%).

6) According to the experts, very important aspects of rural school competitiveness involved incorporating community traditions into the educational process, providing personalized learning and access to resources, which indicated an important need for a localized approach to education.

7) Although the important role of increasing the qualifications of teachers is recognized, the expert opinions revealed that external factors, e.g. demographic trends and political will that generally promote or constrain the development of schools in rural areas, should also be considered for increasing the competitiveness of rural schools. Therefore, the research findings indicate the need for integrated strategies that combine school internal initiatives and support from the national and local governments to increase the quality of education and the competitiveness of rural schools.

8) Although the experts indicated that the main factors in the competitiveness of rural schools were the effective administration of rural schools, the qualifications of teaching personnel and the compliance of curricula with the needs of the rural community, the external factors related to preconditions, e.g. political will. Accordingly, the hypothesis partially proved to be true.

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