

THE ROMA STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

The paper considers the effects of Roma education in Medjmurje County. Although the positive effects are present in many different aspects related to education of Roma, among the most important is the change in Roma attitude toward their own education. The comprehension of importance of Roma children's education and intention to base their future material incomes on the work and competences acquired by education is an important step in developing a collective consciousness of the Roma community of importance of the education and a great step towards more efficient integration.

Key words: Bayash, Croatia, Education, Integration, Medjmurje, Roma people

1. INTRODUCTION

Croatian Roma community is constituted of different ethnical groups. In northern part of Croatia, in Medjmurje County, dominant group is the one who speak *Ljimba d' bjash*. This is an old Romanian dialect that Roma people have taken during their stay in the area of today's Romania (Novak Milić, 2007; Olujić and Radosavljević, 2007). They have immigrated to Croatia during last decades of nineteenth century. They declare themselves as members of Bayash Roma ethnic group according to language they speak.

Roma people belong to the ethnic group which is the least integrated in modern Croatian society. There are two main reasons for that. The first one is related to big prejudices and stereotype view of local population. Its consequence is high social distance (Hrvatić, 1996; Banovac and Boneta, 2006) and a problem of social and spatial segregation of Roma community. The second one is related to the fact that Roma people change their way of living very hard due to tradition that plays very important role in their lives. As Štambuk points (2000a), Roma have chosen social distance as a way of communicating with non-Roma environment that helped them preserve their uniqueness and resist the assimilation process. However, at the same time they are hindering, delaying and slowing down the process of integration into Croatian society.

Many researchers in Roma issues agree that education is the best way to integrate Roma community (Hrvatić, 2000; Šučur, 2000; Dragun, 2000). As Štambuk points, “insisting on the education and progress in this area are long-term, expensive and difficult path, but really the only one in the future will bring results, so in that sense, the only rational” (Štambuk, 2000a, 204). However, education of Roma children is marked by many difficulties and problems. Roma pupils find themselves captured between obligatory school programs with expected educational achievement and real possibilities and capabilities they possess. As Novak Milić points (2007, 94), “Roma children start school without having gone through any kind of preschool education, meet with a variety of novelties, but also the difficulties, of which the greatest are the lack of knowledge of the standard Croatian language or dialect of the area where they live, and meet with the new cultural environment and social habits, and often with new objects and phenomena”. Huge problem is that Roma children also have a lack of competence in their own language. This means that a Roma child at primary school starts to teach not the Croatian words, but also concepts that lie behind these words (Novak Milić 2007).

The existing Croatian education system is not adapted to the requirements and specificities of the Roma ethnic community. It is necessary to develop and implement an education model that would be tailored to the needs, capabilities and requirements of the Roma minority, taking into account any special features such as language, tradition and specific system of values. Possible model for the conceptualization of education of Roma in Croatia, which takes into account all the particularities of the Roma and the current educational system is proposed by Hrvatić (2000). He also suggests that "because there are no any specific curriculum and school forms within the regular school system (specific curricula, courses, textbooks, teaching in the Romani language ...) for Roma minority, as this is partly organized for other national minorities, the process of conceptualization has to be necessarily implemented on gradual, measured, precise and time-dimensioned way, based on scientific facts, therefore pedagogically competent" (Hrvatić, 2000, 269). Given that "education is the fundamental source of all Roma social, cultural and economic adversity and the basis of a specific, identifiable marginal position of Roma" (Štambuk, 2000a, 205), there is a need to introduce a special model of education with the ultimate goal of successful integration of the Roma ethnic minority in the Croatian society. Until now, there has not been made any steps in the implementation of the proposed models of schooling of Roma.

Given that education is very important, but not the only problem with the Roma ethnic minority, when developing models, various procedures and actions aimed at the successful integration of the Roma minority in the Croatian society, there is a need for a comprehensive, holistic approach (Posavec, 2000) on the interdisciplinary level to cover all aspects and problems of their integration. It is also necessary to take into account the different value system of Roma culture because, as Sibley points, Roma are often "viewed negatively because they do not correspond to notions of social and spatial order which prevail in the larger society" (Sibley, 1992, 110).

However, certain improvements in the education of Roma in Croatia do exist. This is partly a result of the existing measures taken to improve the integration of Roma into Croatian society. Education is certainly one of the most important components of the integration of the Roma minority and as such has an important place in the National Program for Roma and Action Plan for the Decade of Roma Inclusion (Croatian Government, 2003, 2008).

The paper presents results of the survey conducted on sample of 104 Roma students between fifth and eighth grade in Medjmurje County on the views of their own education and evaluation of its importance. The aim is to determine to what extent the existing education system affected the change in the value system of the Roma community in terms of

understanding and acceptance of education as an important element of future successful integration into Croatian society. A series of alternative and open-ended survey questions explored the Roma student's perceptions of the importance of education, presence or absence of incentives to education in their social environment, and expectations of the impact of education on their future life.

2. ROMA STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON THEIR OWN EDUCATION

The first part of the survey is related to Roma students' relation to their education. The question *Do you like to go to school* was positively answered by the largest number of students (Fig. 1). Only 6 of 104 students responded negatively to this question.

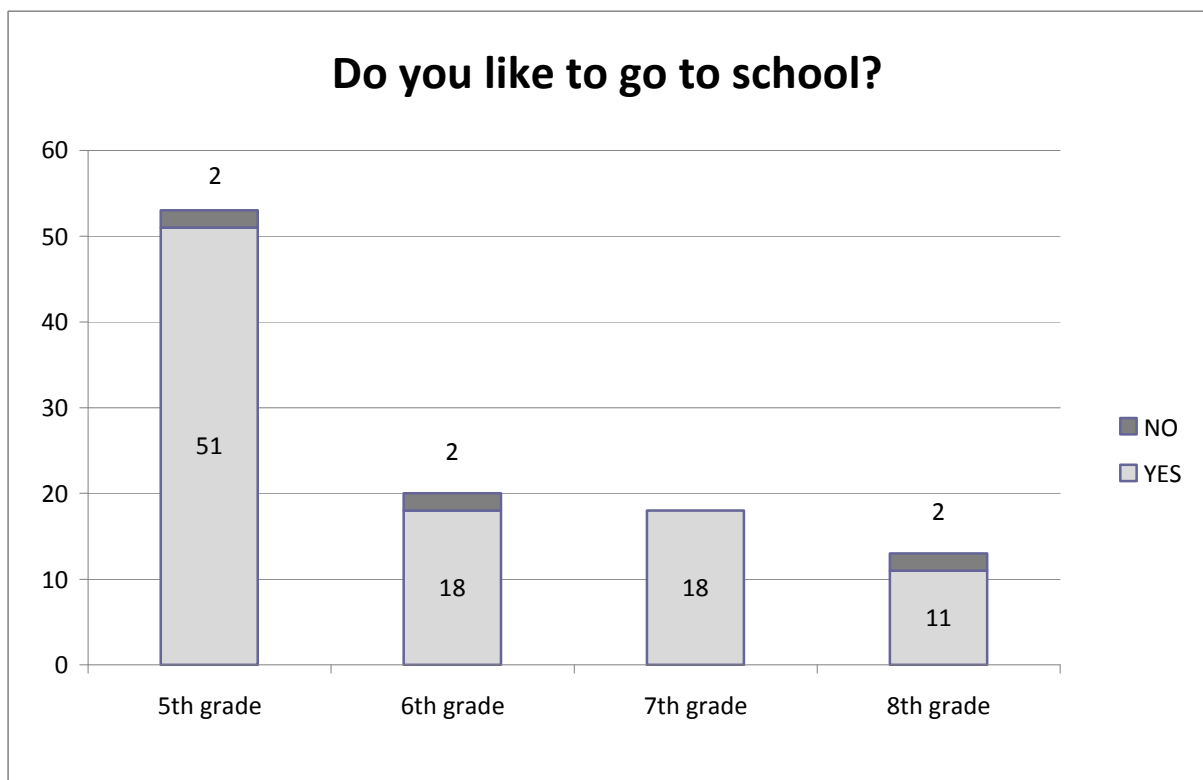


Fig. 1 Frequencies of Roma students' answers to the question "Do you like to go to school?"

Despite numerous problems in their education, very high degree of their failure, the majority of Roma students like to go to school. This distribution of answers gives us the right to consider the school as place where Roma students can leave their closed social environment. Because of the extreme spatial segregation of Roma in Medjimurje (Slezak,

2009), the school is the only meeting point with the majority culture and it offers the possibility of integrative relations. It is likely that for a certain number of students the school presents the only place of safety, protection, and for some individuals possibly the only place where they can get a warm meal. Anyway, the school offers to Roma students a variety of reasons which influenced the presented distribution of responses.

The question *Is it important to go to school* was affirmatively answered by 100% of students (Fig. 2). This distribution of responses indicates that in principle all Roma children are aware of the importance of education. The impact of the existing education system is manifested in the development of awareness of the importance of education.

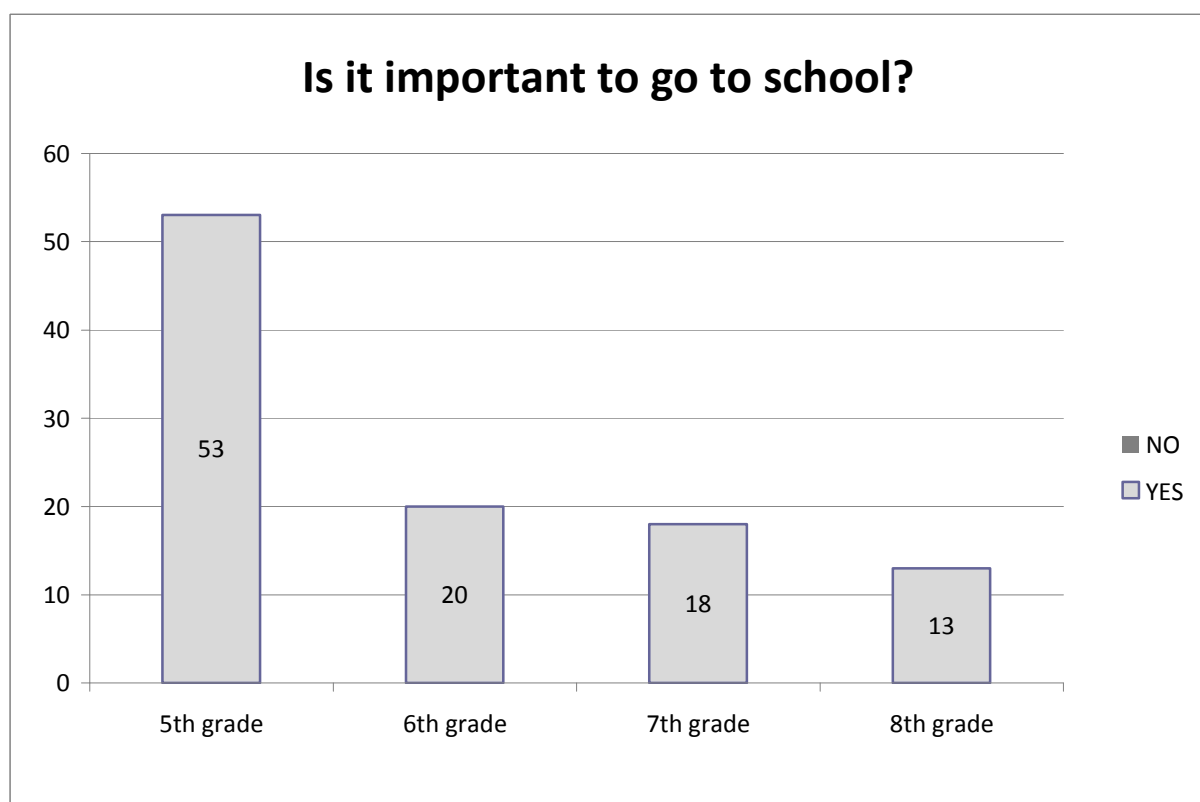


Fig. 2 Frequencies of Roma students' answers to the question "Is it important to go to school?"

Although, in principle, they recognize the importance of education, Roma children in their social environment do not yet have role models that would confirm the relationship *better education - a better life*. Confirmation of this is evident from the distribution of responses to the question *Would you go to school if it was not required* (Fig.3). Even 35.6% of students answered negatively to this question. A little more than a third of the students would not attend the educational system in the case they are not legally obligated. Despite the

fact they love to go to school and generally know that it is important to go to school, a large proportion of students obviously do not see the appropriateness of their own schooling.

The problem of more quality education and successful integration of the Roma minority in the Croatian society is connected to the fact that many Roma children are included in the education system solely because of legal obligatoriness. The lack of empirical correlation between higher levels of education and a higher quality of life is a huge obstacle to education itself, and the total integration of Roma. Although the current educational system in their domain has made a lot in terms of developing a collective awareness of the importance of Roma education, the other social institutions also need to put the theoretical understanding of the importance of education into practice. In other words, it is necessary to enable the Roma who have attained a certain level of education and have acquired a certain competence to find an adequately paid employment.

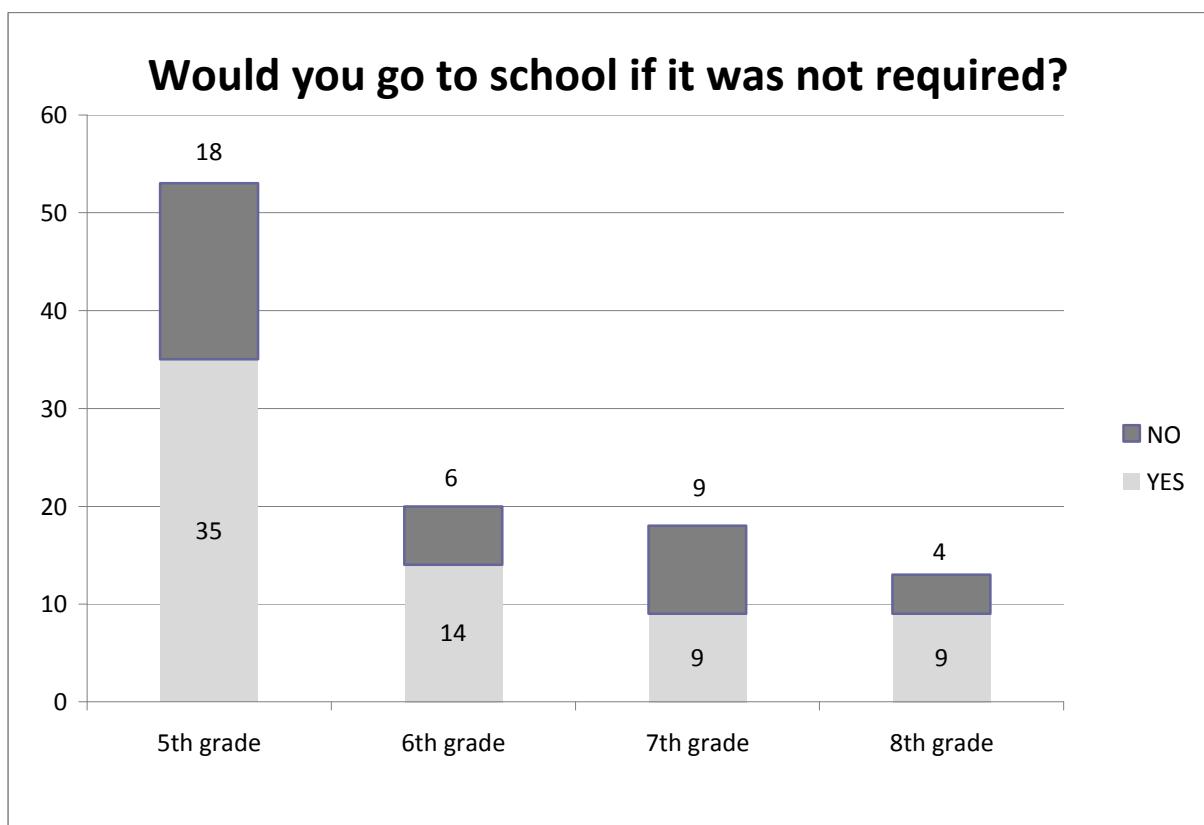


Fig. 3 Frequencies of Roma students' answers to the question "Would you go to school if it was not required?"

Only if there are examples in which education actually contributed to the quality of life of individuals of the Roma community, it is possible to expect substantial progress in education and the integration of Roma. A little less responsible attitude toward education is

evident from the responses on the last homework which was not made by 18.3% of students (Fig. 4). In a situation where many students do not see the appropriateness of their own education, it is actually encouraging that the very high percentage of Roma students (81.7%) made their last homework. This finding is even more significant when one takes into account the responses to the question *What do you find difficult at school* (Fig. 5).

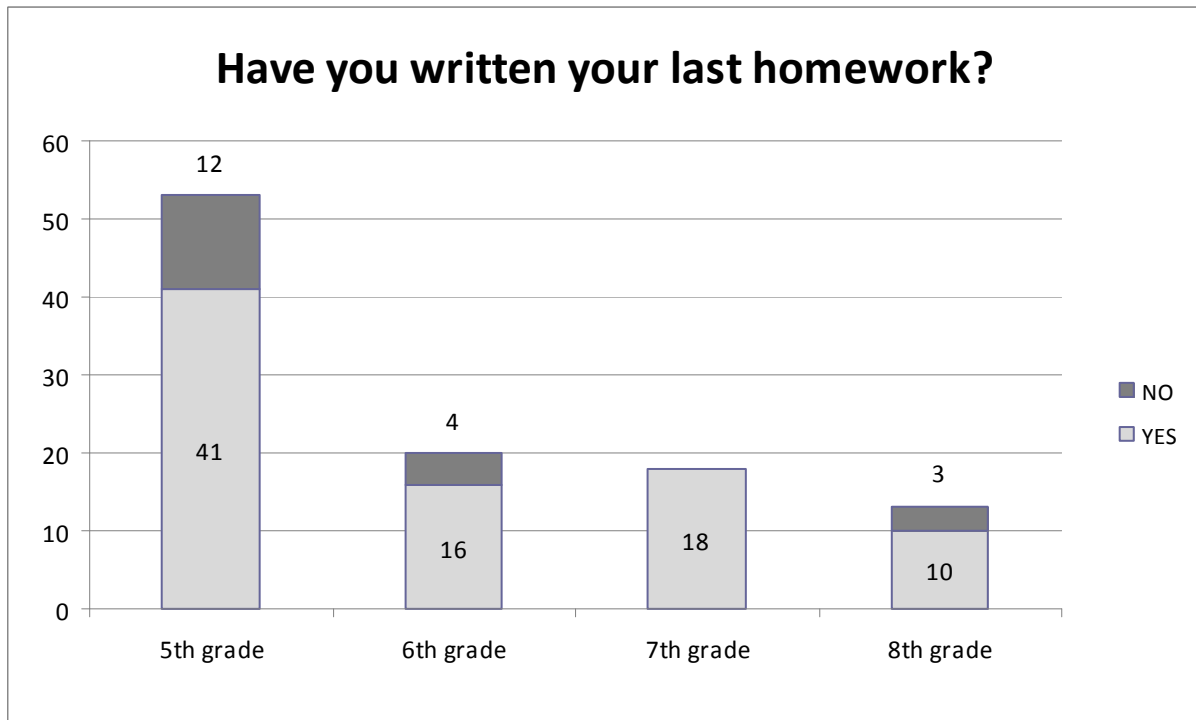


Fig. 4 Frequencies of Roma students' answers to the question "Have you written your last homework?"

Although the largest number of students wrote that they do not find anything difficult in school, there are 29.8% of students who have trouble with understanding the Croatian language. We should bear in mind that these are students between fifth and eighth grade. It is obvious that the language barrier is a very significant barrier to quality education of Roma in the upper grades of elementary school. As Roma in Medjmurje are spatially separated from the majority of the population, they interact solely in their mother, Bayash language in their social environment. A number of students during their education successfully overcomes the basics of the Croatian language, while for a number of students, almost one third of them in the upper grades of elementary school, the Croatian language is still a major problem. This information is very important in the light of consideration of the justification of existence of ethnically segregated classes in some elementary schools in Medjmurje. Although Roma formally achieved the status of the national minority for which is guaranteed the right to

education in their native language, classes for Roma pupils will be conducted in the language of the majority, Croatian. The reason for this lies in the fact that the Roma community in Croatia is composed of different ethnic groups that speak different languages. Another problem is that Bayash language spoken by Roma in Medjmurje is not standardized, and it is only a colloquial language. Another problem is that currently there is only one member of a group of Bayash Roma from Medjmurje who has higher education and is trained for educational work.

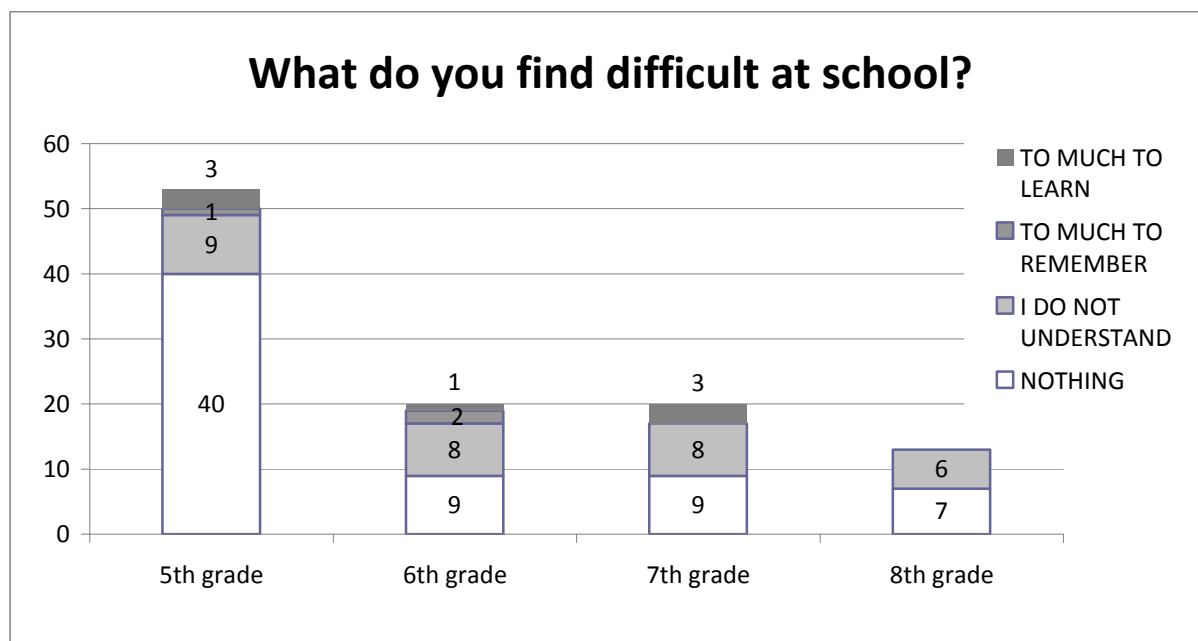


Fig. 5 Frequencies of Roma students' answers to the question "What do you find difficult at school?"

Learning is an important element for human happiness and satisfaction. Of all students surveyed, 87.5% of them responded that after they finish their education, they will have a better life (Fig. 6). "Better" stands for a higher standard of living, which should reduce the gap between the lifestyle of the Roma ethnic minority and the majority of the Croatian population. This information seems to be optimistic because Roma pupils do not have many examples in their surrounding that could support this hypothesis. Specifically, people who live "better" in Roma settlements do not have a "better" life because of their education. Sixth grade students are somewhat skeptical of the connection between education and the "better" life. Most of the surveyed Roma pupils (66.6%) in sixth grade do not believe in "better" life, which will be provided by their education. Roma who have successfully completed primary school are almost all unemployed, even those who have completed secondary education for some simple jobs. Their unemployment discourages belief in a "better" life after graduation.

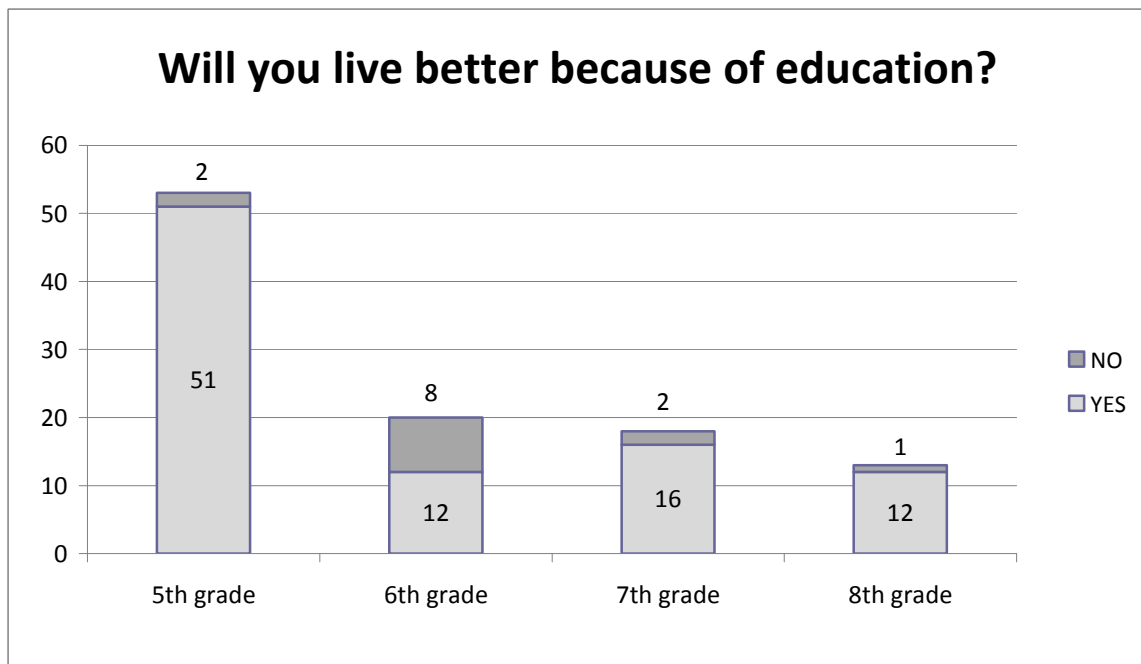


Fig. 6 Frequencies of Roma students' answers to the question "Will you live better because of education?"

Answers to previous questions should be closely linked with the answers to the question "Will you need knowledge acquired in school in your life?" Of course, Roma students see the greatest benefit of reading and writing, and comprehension. Mathematical knowledge is considered important in their lives, but only at the elementary level because it's associated with the need of computation while shopping. For this purpose, the basic mathematical operations are sufficient. The students of the fifth, sixth and seventh grades in most part (98.9%) responded that their knowledge acquired at school will be useful in their future lives. It is interesting to note, though on a small sample, that there is a certain number of eighth grade students who think that they will not need their knowledge acquired at school in their life. Given that these students are about to complete their compulsory primary education, this response may indicate that they have already decided to accept the traditional Roma way of life in which education plays no role, and as such it will not even be necessary.

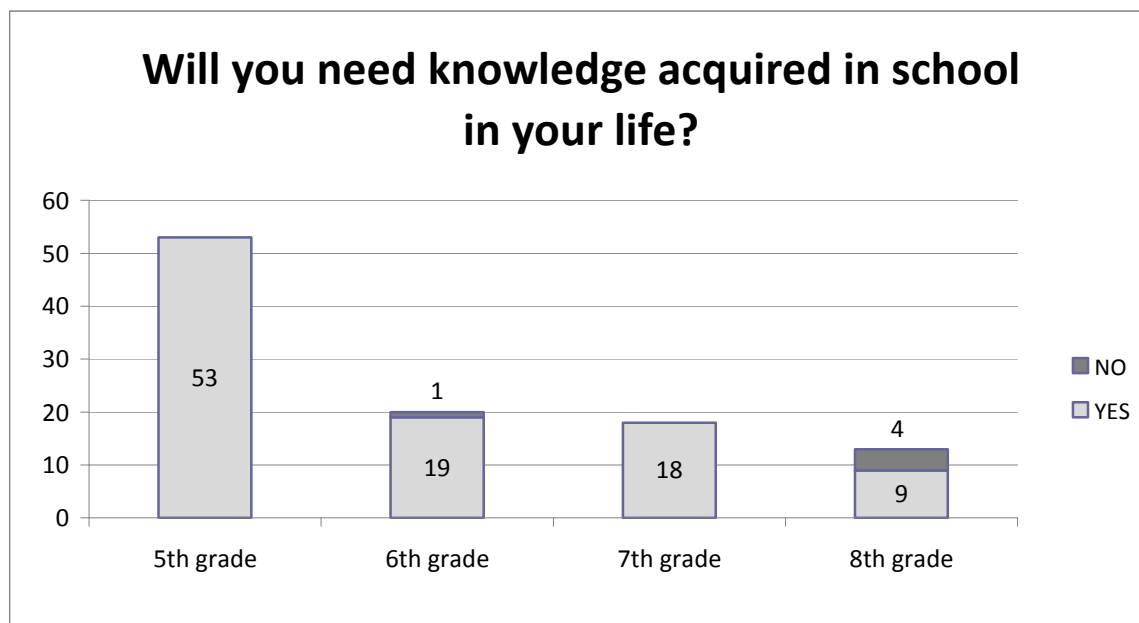


Fig. 7 Frequencies of Roma students' answers to the question "Will you need knowledge acquired in school in your life?"

Figure 8 shows the answers to the question "What will be your source of income after finishing your education?" Students are aware that the money is the basic means necessary for life and that they can earn it with their own work. Even 82.7% of Roma pupils believed that in the future their own earnings will be sufficient for their life. This is a very important result on which we should base the development of measures for integrating the Roma. Change in the income structure of the Roma community is one of the main tasks that must be fulfilled for the purpose of equal Roma inclusion in the socio-economic life of the majority society. The expectation of a large number of Roma students who will base future incomes on their own work is an important educational attainment of the educational system. Certain number of students experienced that there are other ways that are very popular in the Roma community - the use of social assistance. Answers of seven students (6.6%) that they will live on social assistance, tell us that they have no confidence in the possibility of employment. It is expected that social support as a source of income to come into force only after the impossibility of employment, but such responses, however suggest indifference toward work. That means that they do not see the benefits education. The answer "I do not know" for which 8.6% of the students decided is more acceptable. Students are aware of the benefits of education, but examples from their environment of the unemployed Roma who are educated for certain professions discourage them. The choice of farming and the collection of iron is a logical

response of two students. In fact, most of the Roma in Medjmurje make extra income in the gray economy working for local agricultural producers, as well as the collection of secondary raw materials. The students realized that these are also the ways in which they can earn money in such environments.

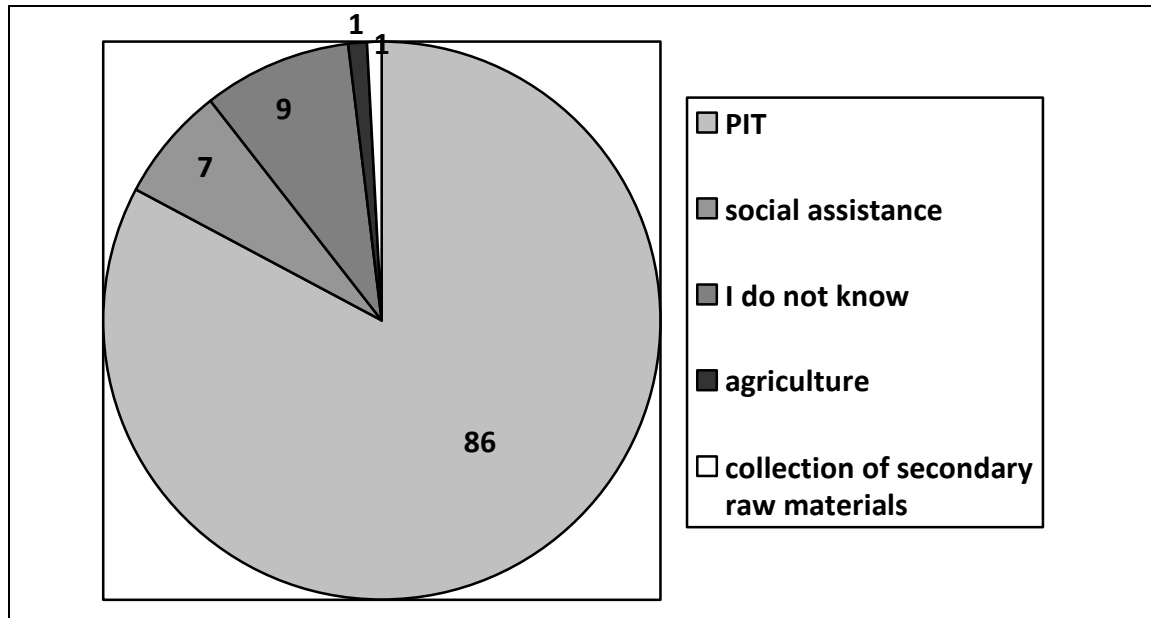


Fig. 8 Frequencies of Roma students' answers to the question "What will be your source of income after finishing your education?"

The role of parents in the process of developing working habits, especially among school children, is to learn and encourage their children to develop these habits. The sooner the children adopt the working habits, it is more likely to keep them and develop later in life. The student is undertaking the process of education, and teacher's partner in common work and the most important reason for the existence of the entire school system and education system (Mijatovic, 2002). For student's achievement there are three important factors: student, teacher and parent. In this survey the five students (4.8%) stated that their parents do not encourage them to learn and perform the obligations of school, while 95.2% of them answered positively. It is certainly good that the students are, except in the school, encouraged by their parents to learn at home. It is therefore necessary to work systematically to raise awareness about the importance of education and improve educational competence of parents as support for the successful education of their children.

However, this encouragement by parents is not enough. Active participation of parents in the learning process and assisting in writing their homework, or their control, the effect of education would be far better. Low educational level of their parents is the main obstacle to this. Despite all the difficulties and obstacles we can always find a solution to the cooperation of Roma parents and schools.

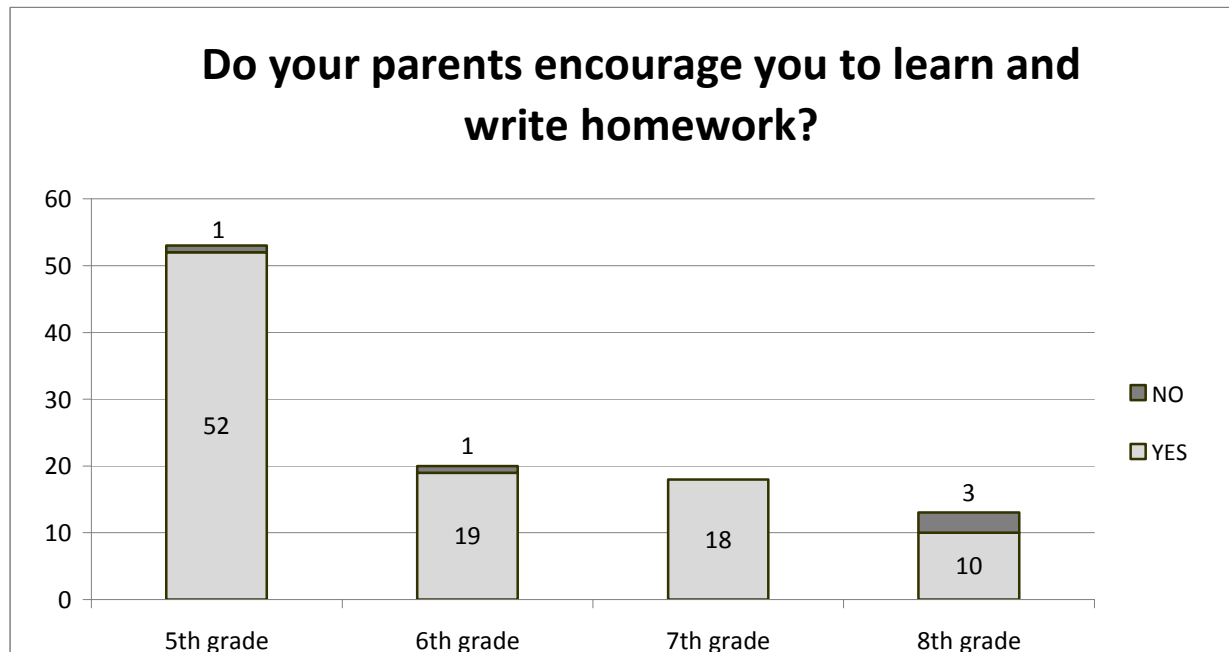


Fig. 9 Frequencies of Roma students' answers to the question "Do your parents encourage you to learn and write homework?"

Although homework is an important component in the process of teaching and learning, the students find it very unpopular. Learners should be left to the responsibility for their homework because they have to understand that it is their job and one of their priorities. Parents should provide an environment that will benefit the homework writing, and that in doing it, parents should not be too involved in the work itself, because the more responsibility they take, the less responsibility will be taken by the students. However, many of Roma pupils, except that they do not have ensured employment, most of them do not know how to solve their homework independently. Even 53.8% of students stated that no one helps them with homework, while only 28.8% responded that their brothers help them, and only 17.3% get the help of the parents. It is expected that mostly their brothers will help them because these contents "closer" to them than to their parents. However, in elementary schools in Medjimurje attended by Roma there are Roma assistants. Roma assistant is a member of the Roma population with at least high school education whose job description is somewhat comparable to the teaching assistants. One of the conditions is that they know Bayash

language spoken by the Roma population in Medjimurje. Roma assistant usually serves as an interpreter because parents and children communicate in their own language, which the teacher does not understand. But except for an interpreter, they serve as a link between home and school and also help the students with homework. The fact that most of students do not get help with their homework is upsetting because it does not mean that they write it independently, but have no one to ask for help.

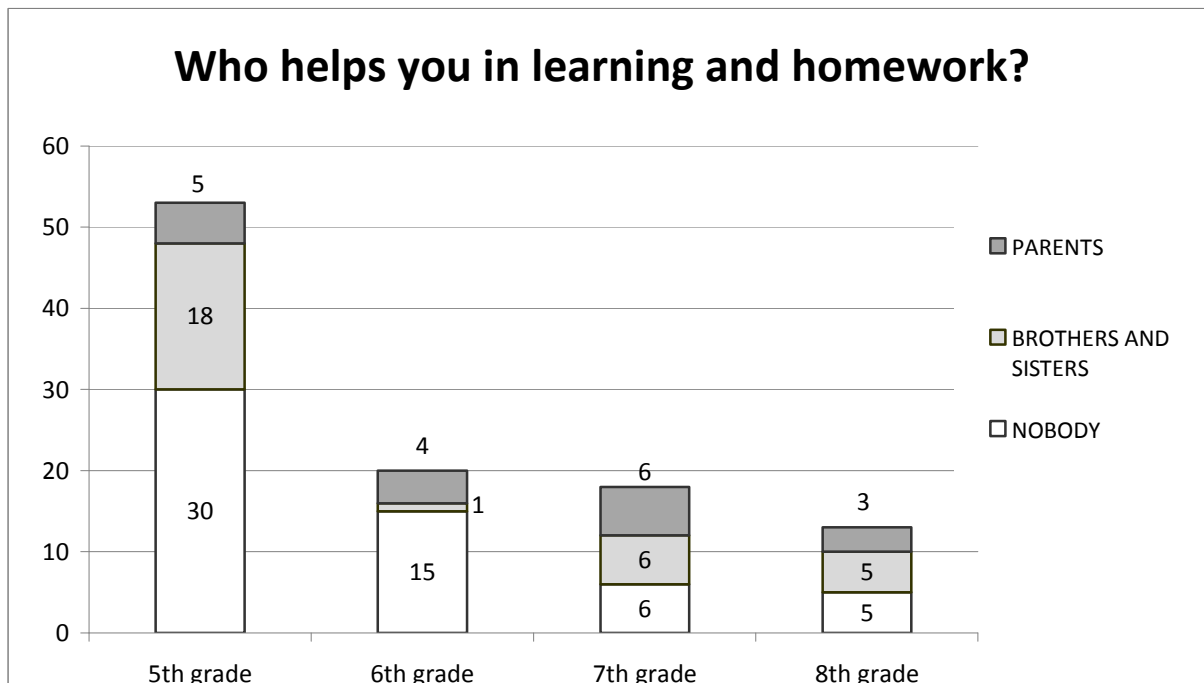


Fig. 10 Frequencies of Roma students' answers to the question "Who helps you in learning and homework?"

3. CONCLUSION

Work with Roma children raises special challenges for educators and teachers and requires specific professional competence. For these specific components educators and teachers are not prepared during their training. This implies knowledge of the Roma language (in the case Medimurje the Bayash language) and culture of the Roma community, special flexibility in work, the art of practicing various forms of cooperation with parents. Rumbak (2007) argues that, sometimes, the only teacher who is Roma can adequately respond to the specific needs of Roma children. Equality, which is provided by law, is not enough. All children have the same rights, including Roma children. Economic opportunities, heritage and tradition are the obstacles for Roma children to involve in the education system as well as all the others. To solve this problem, Roma parents should be educated. In their homes it should

be created a diverse and stimulating environment for the child's optimal physical and psychomotor development, because such environment provide challenges for the child and raises standards of their performance. For these students, school has to become a place that they will recognize as a warm and safe environment with long-term aim of raising the quality of their lives. The results point to significant progress in understanding the importance of education for Roma children. Although a certain part of Roma pupils in principle accept the thesis of the importance of education as a prerequisite for future quality of life, the importance of educational attainment does not lose its importance. Moreover, the educational system as such is not able to provide practical confirmation of the importance of education. With the aim of successful integration of the Roma community in the predominantly Croatian society it is essential that, the integration process started through the primary school system, will be continued timely by the involvement of other institutions that need to help the Roma community in Medjimurje to receive the higher number of individuals who will confirm that education actually contributes to the quality life.

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