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HOMEWORK – THE EXCEPTION AND NOT THE RULE

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Abstract: Even after seven years of thinking about the purpose of homework and intensive work on the implementation of agreed views on homework, there is still a prevailing public opinion that homework is everything that a pupil does at home in order to reinforce acquired knowledge and skills, i.e. to prepare for acquiring new content during the teaching process. We, on the contrary, consider homework to be a mere written task completion without any freedom of choice. Therefore by taking a different approach we wanted to motivate pupils to actively participate in the lesson in order to more effectively and permanently acquire and implement learning content. We conducted a research on the purpose of homework, on the time it takes, on its complexity, attitudes to homework and suggestions about homework. Pupils, parents and teachers participated in the survey. The analysis of the expressed attitudes indicates that there has been a shift in relieving pupils from the homework load, but there is still a lot of room for improvement, especially in individualised approach to pupils.

Keywords: homework, freedom of choice, more active work, motivation, responsibility.

Introduction

Whether we want to admit it or not, the most important question for all primary school pupils, which only few want to be asked upon their arrival from school, is “What is your homework today?”! Years, decades, centuries have passed; school systems have changed, ministers and governments have come and gone; new families have been raised; old school buildings have been replaced; the only thing that has not changed is its majesty called homework.

Practitioners, especially theoreticians in the field of Croatian, Mathematics and foreign language cannot agree on the value of homework or its necessity. Some experts suggest that homework should not be assigned (Težak, 1996) or only a few tasks should be given in lower grades of primary school (Marzano, Pickering & Pollack, 2006), while the others are completely against homework since they see it as a kind of compulsion (Glasser, 1994)

which makes pupils overloaded with obligations exceeding their psycho-physical abilities (Mijatović, 1999).

There probably would be fewer misunderstandings if there was a more specific definition of what homework really is. Some authors define homework as tasks which a pupil has to do in a certain period of time (Mijatović, 2000), i.e. they regard homework as an integral and organic part of the entire teaching process (Franković, Pregrad & Šimleša, 1963) or as a type of written examination (Jensen, 2003).

There are more and more authors who support a considerable decline in assigning homework, or if it is assigned, then it should consist of tasks which pupils can only do at home (Glasser, 1994). Others suggest that pupils should be motivated and enticed to learn and do as much as possible at school (Mijatović, 1999) since teachers then not only check the tasks, but also give feedback (Glasser, 2004). Some experts are strongly opposed to types of homework being assigned in most of our schools, since such homework is not useful for the ones who do not understand it and it is a waste of time for those pupils who have already mastered certain skills.

Important factors, which can contribute to resolving doubts about homework, are the conditions in which the curriculum is being implemented. Schools offering a whole-day or after-school care programmes have more opportunities for revision and practice of learning content in comparison to schools that work in shifts.

Considering the complexity of homework in comparison to its purpose, the real influence on pupils' success, parents' participation, quantity and difficulty, we wanted to determine whether, after a seven-year homework programme implementation, there have been any changes in teaching methods and how this has influenced pupils' motivation and activity during lessons.

A different approach to homework has existed in Primary school Vijenac since 1975, when some teachers started enticing pupils to change their attitude to work at school and at home. At the end of 1990s we continued to carry out this type of work with more followers every year. The first action research about homework was conducted in Primary school Vijenac in 2004 after which we agreed on a unified approach to homework in our school.

2 The aim of the research

The research attempted to examine the amount of homework assignments in Primary school Vijenac during 2011 and to compare the data with the results obtained in the previous research in 2004. Furthermore, we wanted to determine whether there have been any changes in homework

quality and quantity considering the agreed approach to homework seven years ago.

3 Research methodology

The research was conducted on a sample of 176 respondents: 83 pupils from grades 2 – 8, 69 parents and 24 teachers (7 lower primary and 17 higher primary teachers). It is important to emphasise that pupils were selected based on their school success and that in every grade there was the same number of pupils with lower, good and excellent grades.

The anonymous questionnaire was carried out in Primary school Vijenac in January 2012. The pupils responded to it at school, while parents received it at home.

The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions, nine of which were closed-ended questions and one was a combined type. The same questionnaire was used in 2004.

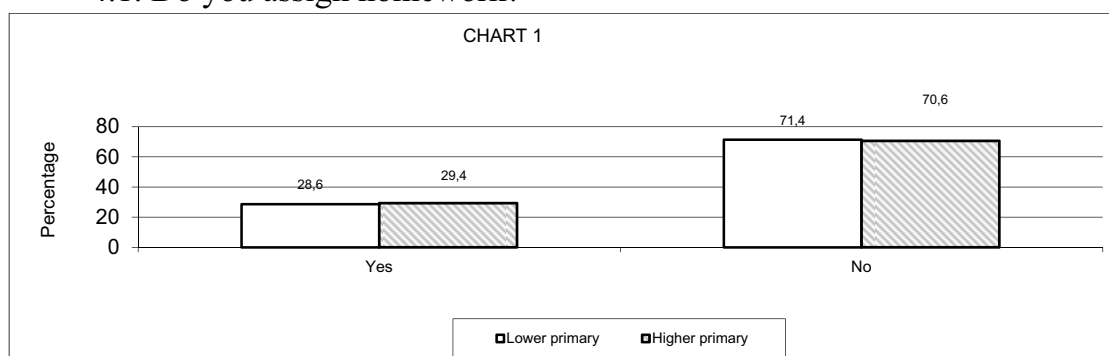
The research examined in which subjects homework is assigned, how often, why, how much time it takes to do it, how difficult the tasks are, how independent pupils are when doing it, whether pupils get feedback on their homework, whether homework helps reinforce knowledge and the suggestions about homework.

The results are presented in graphical form in percentages with interpretation.

4 Research results

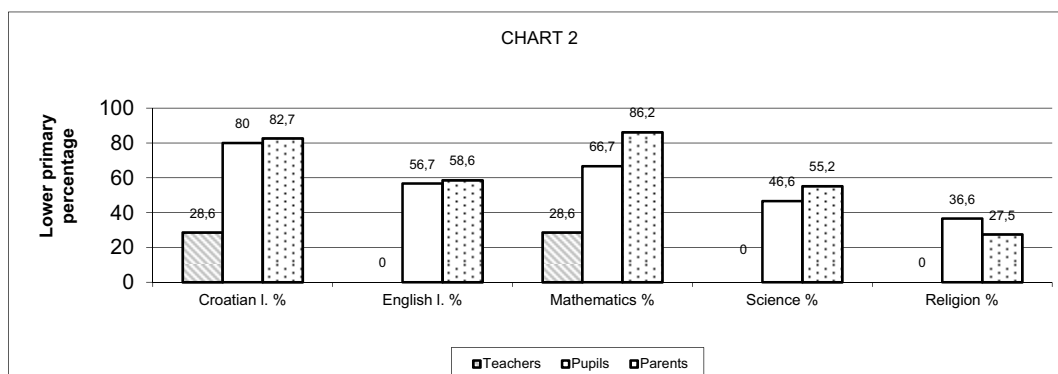
The interpretation of the 2012 research results is accompanied by the 2004 research results. The difference in answers is in brackets.

4.1. Do you assign homework?

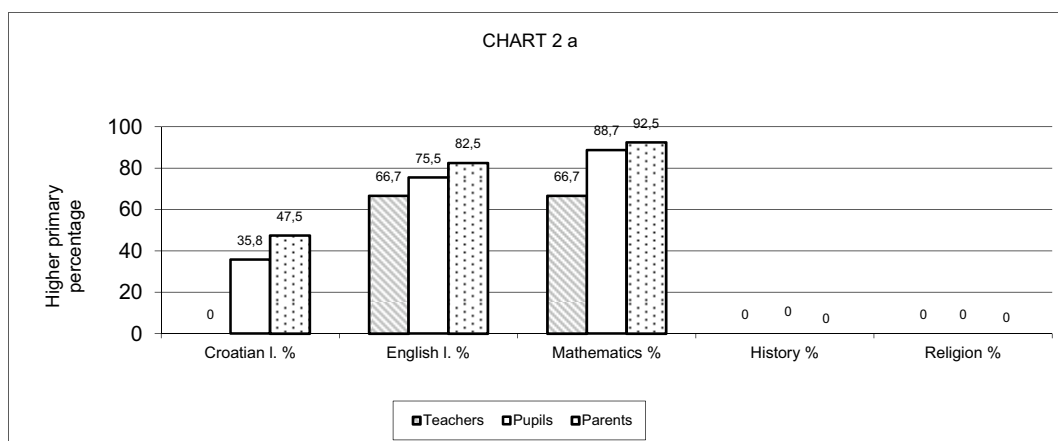


Graph 1 indicates that the same number of teachers in lower and higher primary school assign homework, which is a considerably smaller percentage when compared to the previous research (higher 71.4% fewer, 31.7 % fewer). Teachers' attitudes are the result of an accepted approach to the definition of homework.

4.2. In which subjects is homework assigned?

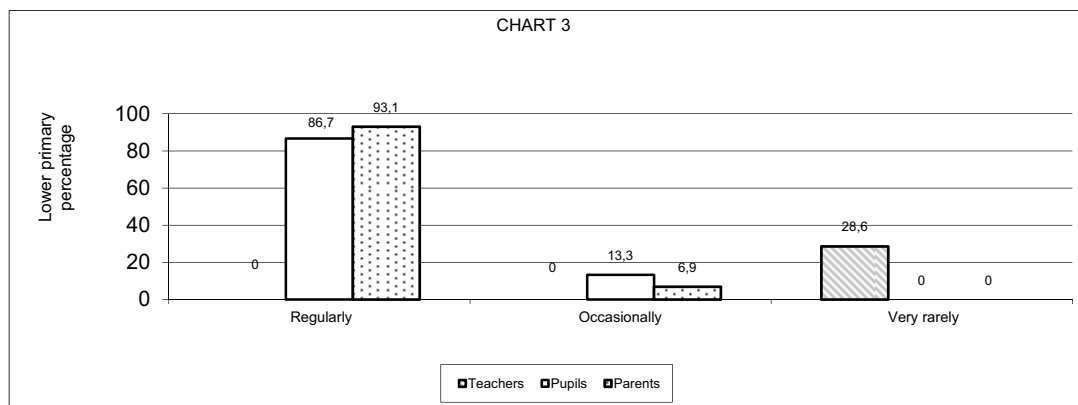


Some lower primary school teachers assign homework in Croatian language and Mathematics, while pupils state that homework is also assigned in other subjects, but it is only a small percentage (in comparison to 2004: 20 % less in Croatian, 33.3 % less in Mathematics, 48.6 % less in Science and 35.3 % less in Religion). According to pupils' responses, homework has been assigned to a greater extent only in English language (6.7 %). The parents expressed similar opinion.

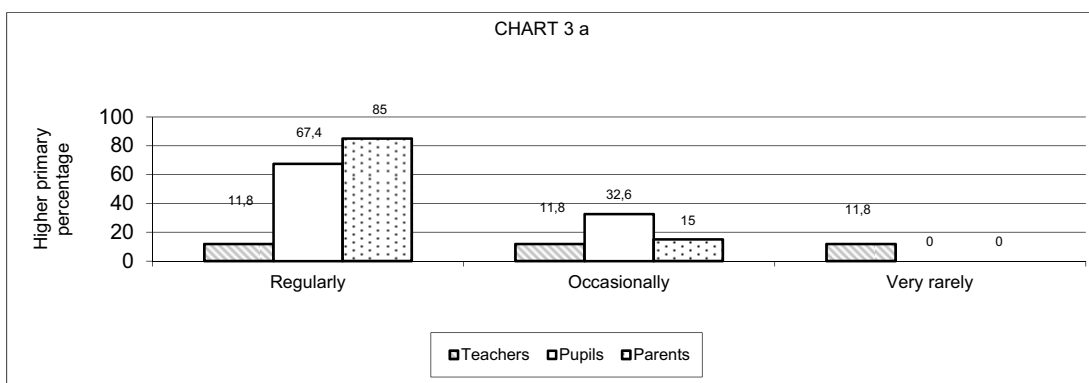


The results for higher primary school grades indicate that there is a great change in percentages of teachers assigning homework when compared to 2004. The teachers assign homework only in Mathematics and English (33.3 % less). The parents and pupils agree that there is less homework (64.5 % less in Croatian, 20.4 % less in English, 7.2 % less in maths). Homework is not being assigned in other school subjects.

4.3. How often do teachers assign homework, how often do pupils do homework?

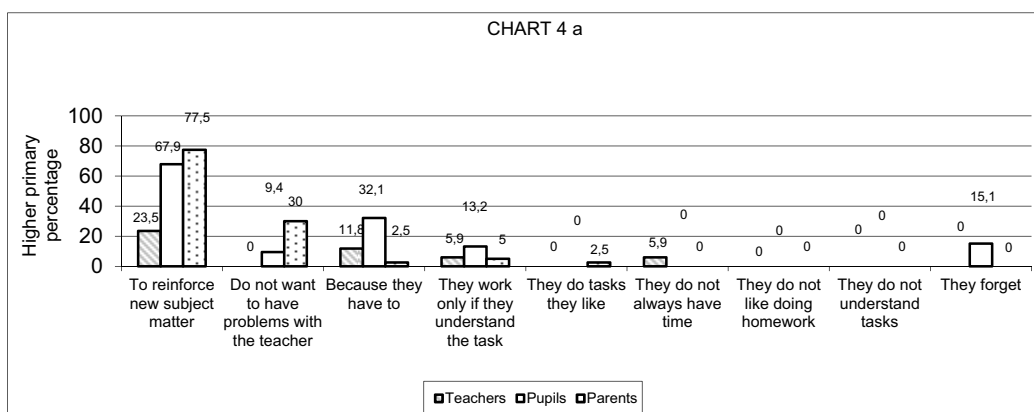
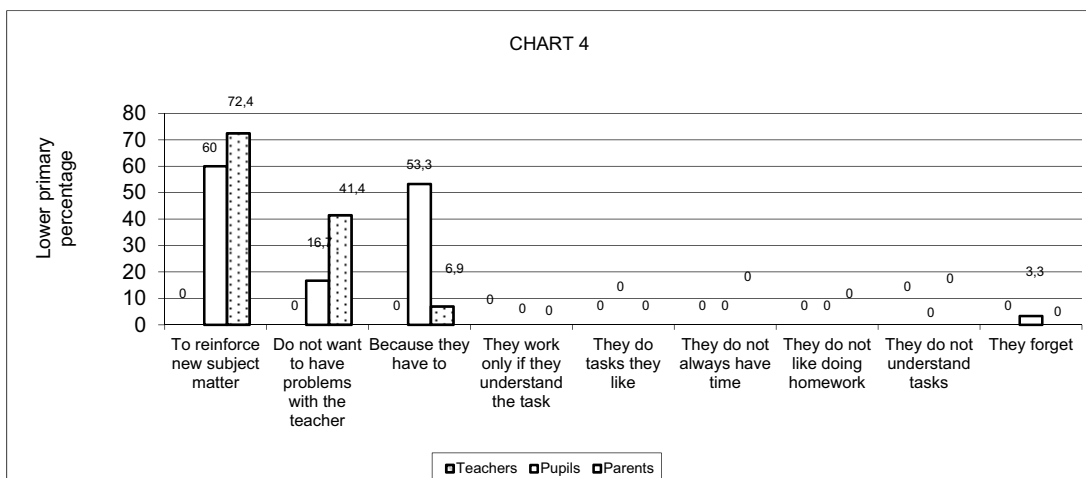


Considering lower primary school teachers, 28.6 % of them state that they very rarely assign homework and 71.4 % never assign it, whereas the parents and pupils express the opposite. Comparing this to the previous research, the pupils and parents state that the percentage of regularly assigned homework is higher (3.4 % pupils and 12.5 % parents), and for occasionally assigned homework the percentage is smaller (3.4 % pupils and 11.5 % parents). Obviously there is a disagreement about the concept of homework.



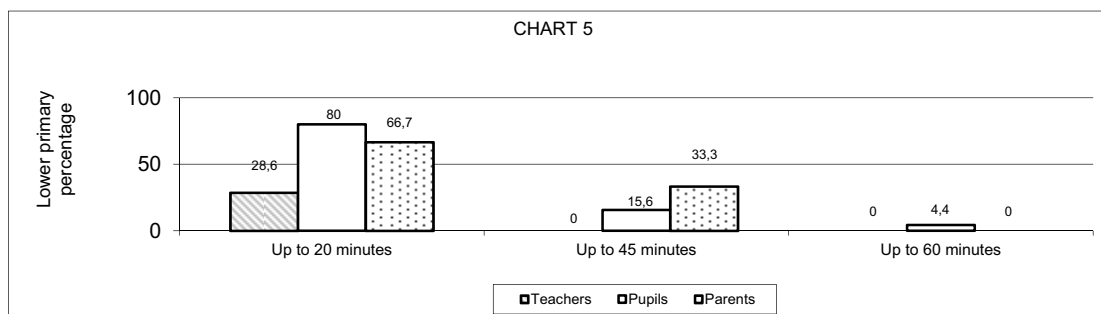
The number of teachers who assign homework regularly, occasionally and rarely has decreased (22 % lower). A lower percentage of pupils state that they regularly have homework (20.8% lower), while more pupils state that they occasionally have homework (32 % higher). The obtained results for parents' opinion about homework frequency are similar to pupils'.

4.4. Why do pupils work in this way?

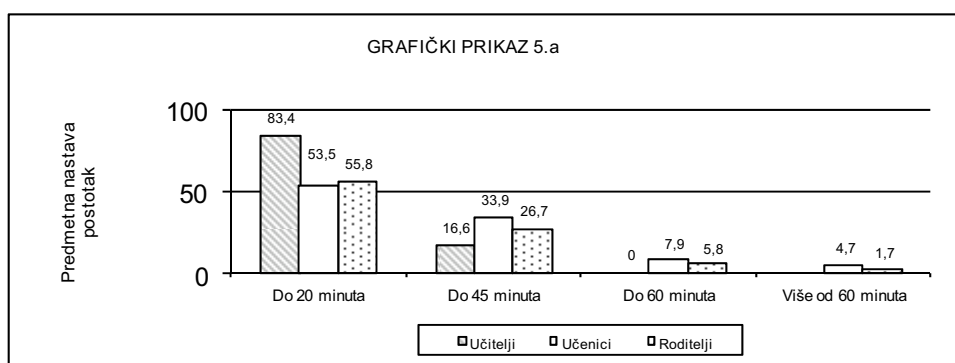


The results from both researches indicate that all respondents emphasise homework's role in reinforcing the new subject matter, i.e. this is the reason for doing homework.

4.5. How much time does it take to do homework?

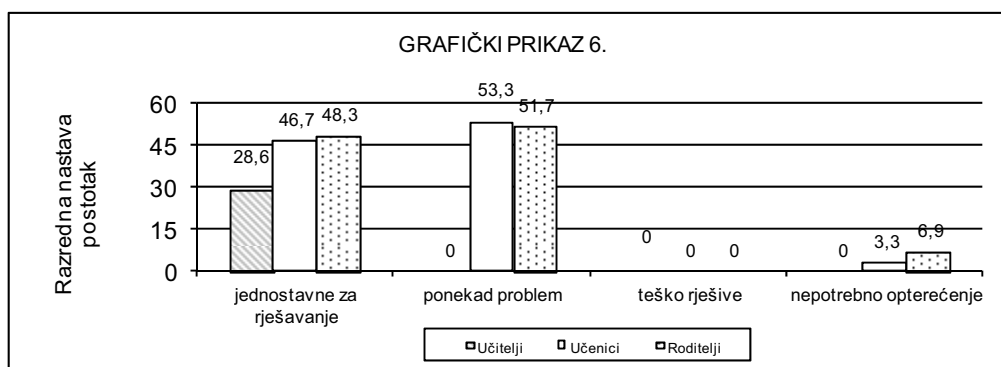


Lower primary school teachers, who assign homework, state that it does not take more than 20 minutes to do homework. The pupils mostly agree, but one third of the parents think that it takes up to 45 minutes to do homework. In comparison to the previous research there is a higher percentage of the pupils and parents who state that 20 minutes is enough to do homework (12 % pupils and 7.5 % parents). It is interesting that there are fewer pupils who think that it takes up to 45 minutes to complete homework (6.8 % lower).



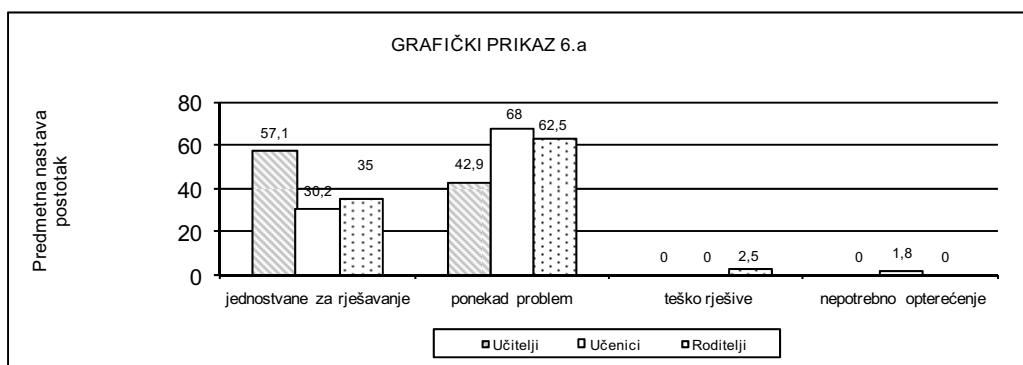
There is an interesting change in the higher primary grades. The same number of teachers state that it takes up to 20 minutes to do homework, but there is a lower percentage of the pupils who say that it takes 20 minutes to do homework (16.9 % lower). The percentage of the pupils who state that it takes up to 45 minutes to do homework is higher (9.4 %).

4.6. How difficult is homework?



The same number of lower grade pupils and their parents think that homework is simple, whereas the others state that it is sometimes a problem in comparison to the previous research in which there was a significant difference in understanding the task complexity. The results indicate that there is a

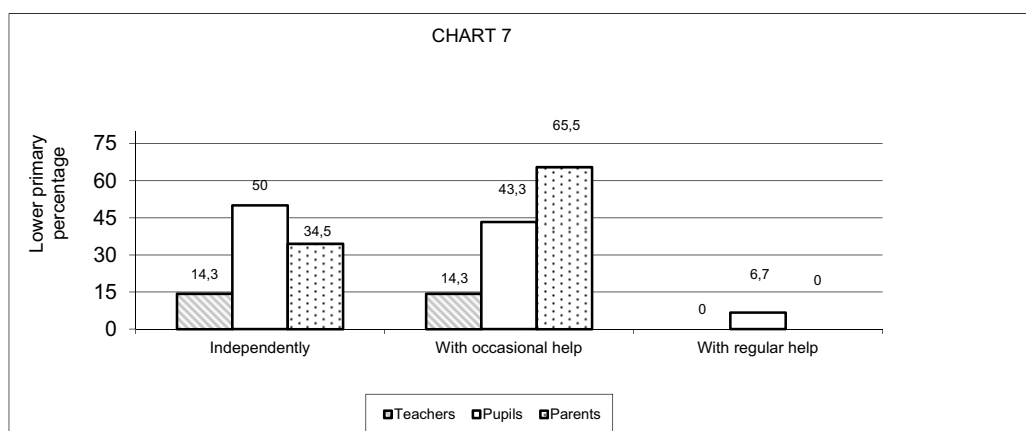
positive change especially regarding the adequacy of homework complexity and pupils' skills.



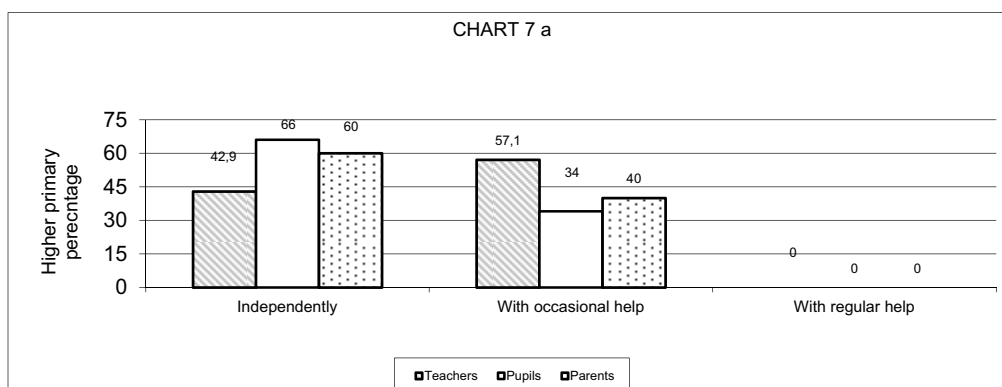
In higher primary grades for most pupils and parents homework sometimes represents a problem - for 68 % of the pupils and 62.5 % of the parents. Homework is easy for 30.2 % pupils and 35 % of parents (in comparison to the previous research 1.6 % pupils more consider homework easy and 6.4 % parents; 0.7 % more pupils stated that it is sometimes a problem, but 6.9 % fewer parents say the same) On the contrary, 57.1 % teachers believe that homework is easy, 42.9 % that it is sometimes a problem (compared to the previous research 4% fewer teachers think homework is easy, 9.6 % more teachers think it is sometimes a problem).

4.7. Independence in doing homework

Trying to check the validity of one of the key arguments for doing homework stating that it contributes to pupils' independence, we asked the respondents whether pupils do homework independently or with somebody's occasional or regular help.



In lower grades 50 % of the pupils state that they work independently, while 34.5 % of the parents confirm this. Furthermore, 43.3 % of the pupils need occasional help, while 65.5 % of the parents agree with this statement. An equal number of the teachers who assign homework express that pupils work independently or occasionally need help. (There are more pupils who work independently, 7.1 %, i.e. there are fewer pupils who need occasional help 9.1 % in comparison to 2004).



49.2 % teachers state that pupils do homework individually, while 57.1 % believe that they occasionally need help; the parents and the pupils state that 66 %, i.e. 60 % work independently, while 34 % of the pupils and 42 % of the parents think that they need occasional help. (In comparison to 2004, 29.3 % more teachers believe that pupils occasionally need help).

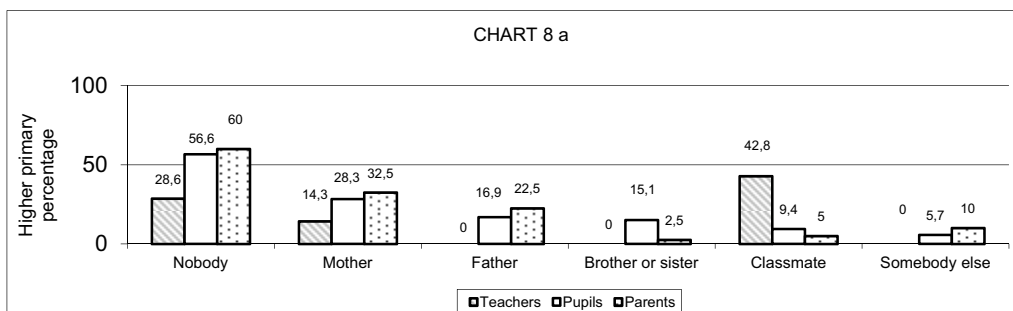
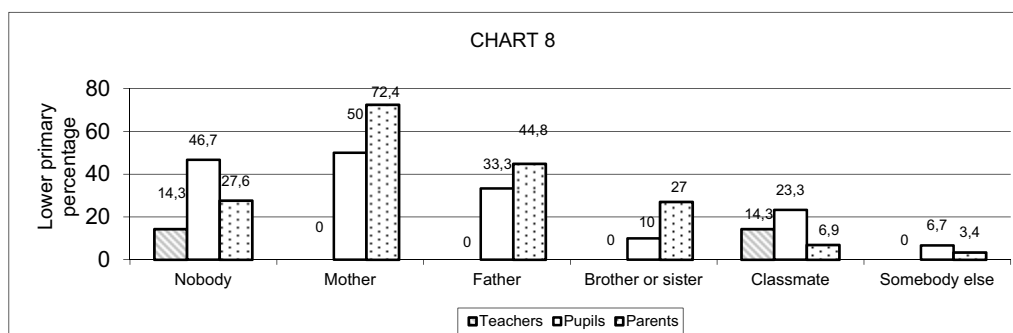
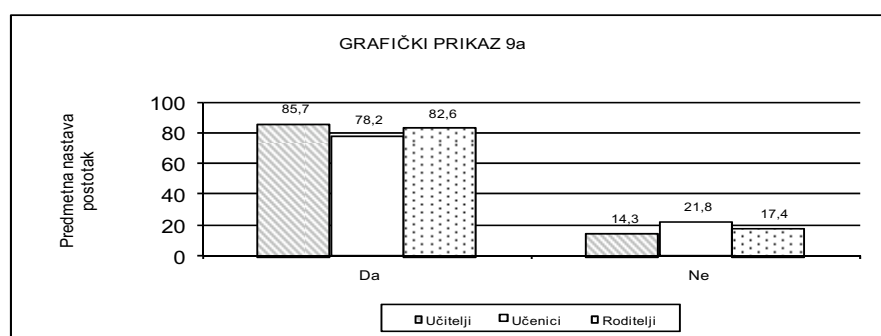
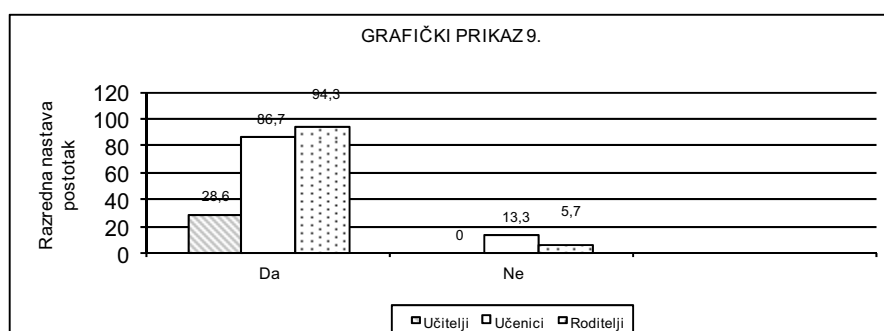


Chart 8 shows that 46.7 % of lower primary school pupils state that nobody helps them with homework and 27.6 % of the parents confirm that. Other pupils are helped by mothers, 50 %; fathers, 33.3 %; classmates, 23.3 %; siblings 10 % or somebody else 6.7 %. The parents described this situation differently since 22.4 % more parents than pupils think that mothers help with homework. As for the teachers, 14.3 % believe that nobody helps the pupils and 14.3 % state that the help is provided by classmates (compared to 2004 18.1 % of the pupils state they are more independent, while 20 % more parents say they help with homework).

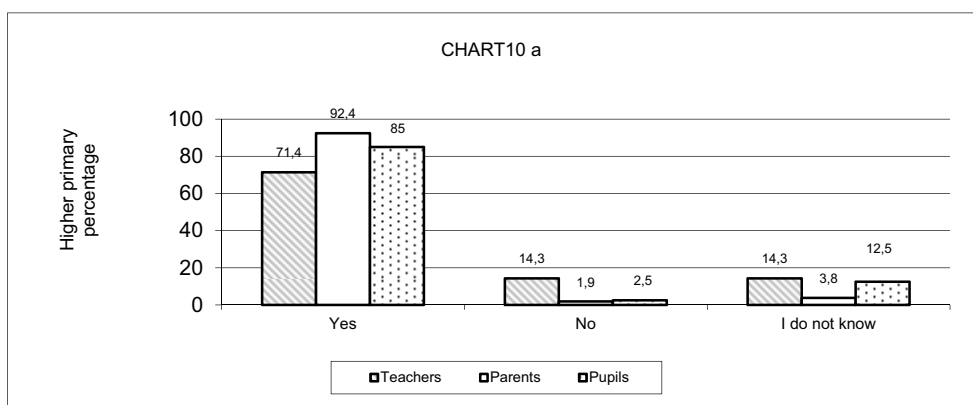
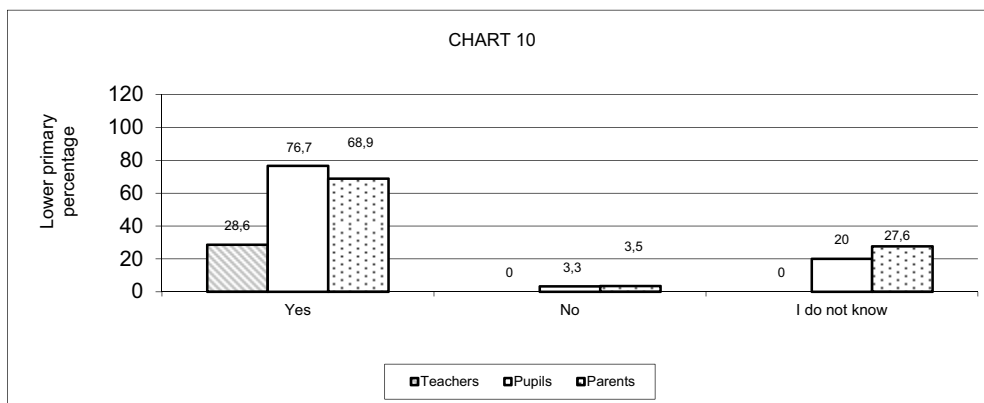
In higher primary school grades there are more independent pupils, 56.6 % claim they do not need any help, which is confirmed by 60 % of the parents. Only 28.6 % of the teachers think the pupils are independent, while 42.8 % think classmates help with homework. The pupils and parents disagree with the last statement. (11.7 % of the pupils and 25.3 % more parents state that pupils are independent; fathers help somewhat more by 5.8 % and mothers less by 8.3 %).

4.9. Is homework checked regularly?



The teachers who assign homework check it regularly and the pupils and parents confirm that.

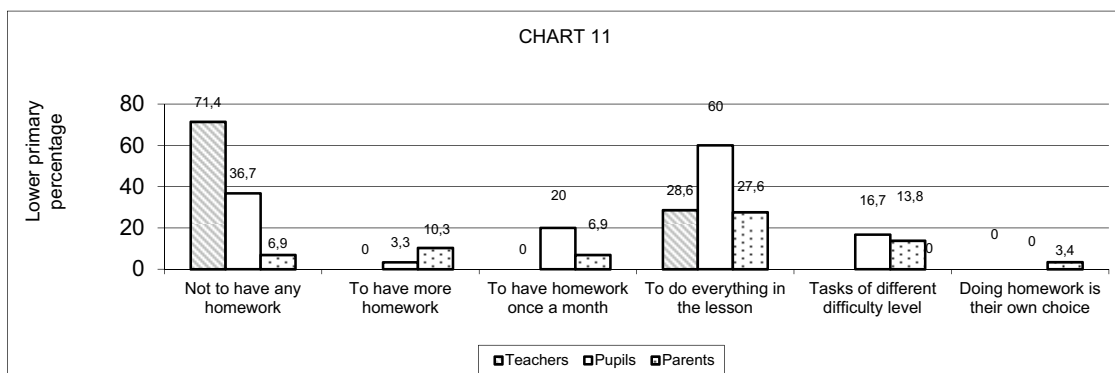
4.10. Does homework help pupils to reinforce knowledge?



The majority of the respondents from all three groups agree that homework helps to reinforce knowledge (the 2004 results are not very different).

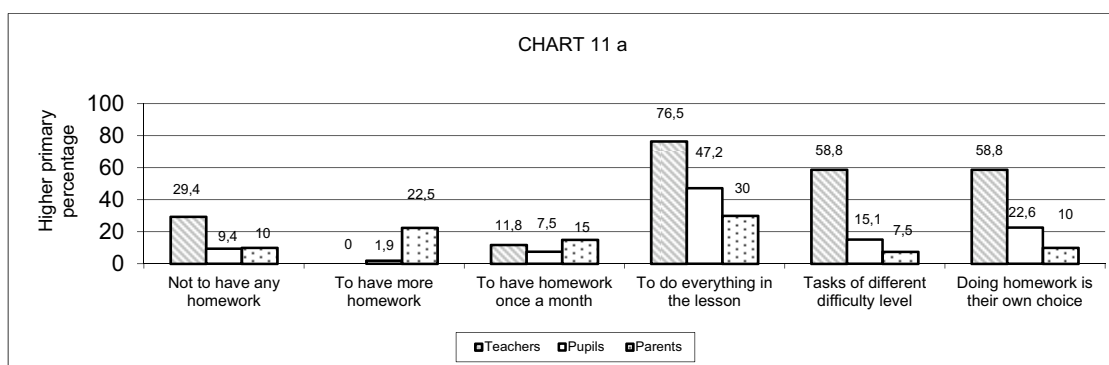
4.11. What did the respondents suggest?

This is a combined question since the respondents were offered six statements with the possibility to write additional suggestions.



As for lower primary school teachers, 71.4 % of them, believe that homework should not be assigned at all and 28.6 % state that all tasks should be completed in the lesson (in the 2004 research none of the teachers supported the idea of not assigning homework at all). Most pupils, 60 % want to finish all tasks in the lesson, while 36.7 % wish there was not any homework (17.7 % more pupils wish there was not any homework, 27.6 % would like to finish all tasks during the lesson, 13.8 % would like not to have the tasks of the same difficulty for all pupils). It is interesting that 10.3 % of the parents state that they would like more homework to be assigned (2.1 % more parents wish there was not any homework, but 8.1 % fewer would like everything to be done in the lesson and 13 % fewer parents state that tasks should not be the same for all the pupils).

In the second part of the question the teachers suggest that tasks should be assigned for homework for those pupils who want to do it at home. The parents suggest that there should be no changes regarding homework, namely the tasks which the pupils do not finish at school should be done at home; homework should be assigned when there is a need for it and it should not be graded.



Most of the higher primary school teachers, 76.5% think that everything should be done during lessons; 58.8 % would like to assign tasks of different level of difficulty and that pupils can choose whether they want to do homework or not, while 29.4 % think homework should not be assigned (23.8 % more teachers wish there were not any homework, 20.9% more teachers would like everything to be finished in the lesson and to assign tasks of various difficulty. There is a considerable change in teachers' attitudes, 58.8 % more teachers wish that pupils were able to choose whether they want to do homework or not). Most of the pupils, as well as the teachers, would like everything to be done in the lesson and that doing homework is their own choice (compared to the 2004 results, 12.4 % more pupils wish they could decide whether to do homework or not and 10.5 % more would like to finish

everything at school). Their parents were quite indecisive in this part of the question, although most of them, 30% would like all tasks to be finished at school, while 22% would like more homework to be assigned. In the second part of the question the parents suggest that the teachers should make a decision on assigning homework.

Conclusion

The research results indicate that the teachers, pupils and parents have different concepts of what homework really is. Namely, most pupils and parents state that homework is usually assigned in Mathematics and foreign languages and rarely in Croatian, especially in higher primary grades. On the other hand, the teachers state that they assign homework only occasionally, and when they do, it is only to finish something they started doing in the lesson. The pupils and the parents regard this work at home as homework and say it is being assigned on a regular basis. Most of them believe that it takes up to 20 minutes per subject to do homework and up to 45 minutes to do Mathematics homework in higher grades. They also confirm that homework is regularly checked by the teachers. Most of them suggest that all the tasks should be finished at school and that doing homework should be a pupil's choice.

In comparison to the 2004 research it is obvious that teachers have changed their approach to homework since they assign less homework. Moreover, they believe that homework is easier and that it takes up to 20 minutes to do it. More teachers estimate that the pupils occasionally need help with homework therefore it is important to do tasks during the lesson where teachers can provide expert guidance. The pupils have become more independent and agree to do more complex tasks in the lesson in order to have fewer written assignments at home. The parents confirmed that there is less homework, but it can also sometimes be difficult to do it. Both parents take part in doing homework and the amount of time for doing it has declined.

We can conclude that considerable changes have occurred in the sense that pupils have been relieved from the homework load, but there is still some room for improvement, especially regarding individual approach to pupils. By making it possible for pupils to choose tasks for practice, revision, examination and knowledge application, we entice them to work individually and to take responsibility for their own work and success.

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DOMAĆE ZADAĆE – IZNIMKA, A NE PRAVILO

Sažetak: I nakon sedam godina tijekom kojih smo promišljali o svrhovitosti domaćih zadaća i intenzivno radili na provedbi dogovorenih stajališta o domaćim zadaćama, i dalje preteže mišljenje javnosti da je domaća zadaća sve ono što učenik radi u domu u svrhu učvršćivanja stečenih znanja i vještina, odnosno za pripremanje usvajanja novih znanja u nastavi. Nasuprot tomu pod pojmom domaća zadaća mi podrazumijevamo isključivo rješavanje zadataka u pisanu obliku bez mogućnosti izbora. Slijedeći takvo naše promišljanje željeli smo drukčijim pristupom nastavi motivirati učenike na aktivniji rad na nastavnom satu u svrhu učinkovitijega i trajnijega usvajanja i primjene nastavnih sadržaja. Stoga smo o svrhovitosti domaće zadaće, vremenu potrebnom za njezino rješavanje, njezinoj kompleksnosti, odnosu spram domaće zadaće i prijedlozima u svezi s domaćom zadaćom proveli istraživanje anketirajući učenike, roditelje i učitelje. Analizom iskazanih stajališta možemo zaključiti da je učinjen pomak u rasterećenju učenika domaćim zadaćama u najužem smislu tog pojma, a da nam predstoji daljnje unaprjeđivanje rada, posebice u individualnom pristupu učenicima.

Ključne riječi: domaća zadaća, mogućnost izbora, aktivniji rad, motivacija, odgovornost.

HAUSAUFGABEN - AUSNAHME, NICHT DIE REGEL

Zusammenfassung: Auch nach sieben Jahren, in denen wir über die Angemessenheit der Hausaufgaben nachgedacht und intensiv an der Umsetzung der vereinbarten Positionen über die Hausaufgaben gearbeitet haben, herrscht noch weiterhin die öffentliche Meinung, dass die Hausaufgaben all das beinhalten, was der Schüler zu Hause macht, um seine Kenntnisse und Fähigkeiten zu festigen, bzw. zur Vorbereitung auf die Wissensaneignung im Unterricht. Im Gegensatz dazu verstehen

wir unter dem Begriff Hausaufgaben ausschließlich das Lösen von Aufgaben in schriftlicher Form ohne Wahlmöglichkeiten. Daraufhin wollten wir mit einem anderen Ansatzpunkt die Schüler weiterhin motivieren, aktiv am Unterricht teilzunehmen, um die Aneignung und die Anwendung der Lehrinhalte effizienter und dauerhafter zu machen. Also haben wir durch Befragung von Schülern, Eltern und Lehrern die Zweckmäßigkeit von Hausaufgaben, die erforderliche Zeit für das Lösen von Aufgaben, ihre Komplexität, die Haltung gegenüber Hausaufgaben und die Anregungen zum Thema Hausaufgaben erforscht. Aus der Analyse der angegebenen Stellungen können wir schließen, dass eine Verschiebung zur Entlastung der Schüler mit Hausaufgaben im strengsten Sinne des Wortes vorgenommen wurde, und dass eine weitere Arbeitsförderung vor uns liegt, vor allem in der individuellen Betreuung von Schülern.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Hausaufgabe, Wahlmöglichkeit, aktivere Arbeit, Motivation, Verantwortung.