Motivating Roma women through computer education in Thrace

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Abstract: This paper aims to discuss the findings of a research among Roma women, an excluded and marginalized population in Thrace, who participated in adult education computer training programs. The literature review for similar cases in other countries, defined various actions for the socio-economically disadvantaged people living in rural, remote and isolated regions who managed to gain their community empowerment through non-formal education by using the ICTs. The experiences from other countries let us form suggestions for more improved and better resulted computer training programs.
Key words: ICTs, non-formal education, Roma women, Thrace

Introduction

Continuous education and training enhance the chances for learners to participate in the processes of socio-economic development and upgrade their qualifications for the expansion of their employment opportunities. Long time unemployment, limited education, poverty, lack of social solidarity can underestimate the social cohesion (UNESCO, 1997). In a society with these demands, the socially excluded groups with limited education confront a higher possibility for marginalization (Baros & Manafi 2009). Life long learning has given new orientation to all kinds of education: formal (FE), non formal (NFE), informal (IE) even incidental. The non formal education system has come up as a very promising alternative to the formal education system in an effort to making educational opportunities available to a larger population and addressing the needs of contemporary times (Thompson, 2001). Even illiterates have taken benefit of NFE to obtain skills in order to confront needs of contemporary life. NFE is not compulsory, it does not lead to a formal certification as it is organized outside the framework of the formal system of education and it may or may not be state-supported.

In addition, ICTs as a tool for effective enhancement of learning, teaching and education management; as it allows us to learn anytime, from knowledge sources anywhere in the world and gain an overview of our relationships and ourselves in

different settings (Giddens, 1990); has been used for various basic education and skill training activities through both formal and non-formal education, covering the entire spectrum of education. Since education and the workplace have been revolutionized by information technology over the past years, the new "technologically oriented" jobs, created in the private and public sectors (Cooper & Weaver, 2003), necessitated functional literacy, numeracy and computer literacy.

It is generally accepted that education helps women achieve their empowerment as it increases their capability, it arises their self-confidence, it provides them with knowledge to confront problems and situations that arise in their domestic life and gives opportunities to contribute and act equally as men do (Moulton, 1997). Information and communication technologies as an educational tool, promote women's empowerment and advancement in any society. We cannot expect that ICTs offer a panacea for social and economical development or can work as a wonder-working magic wand to make the discriminations women faced through centuries eliminate, but we can expect ICTs to prevent further ones.

Examples from other countries

We focused on NFE activities through ICTs taking in consideration training programs in several countries trying to put them together with findings of selected case studies of two groups comprised of Roma women who are the most excluded and marginalized population in Thrace. Programmes of "ICTs for community empowerment through NFE" in Thailand, Sri Lanka, in Lao PDR, in Uzbekistan, in Sub-Saharan Africa, in India are also presented in the paper (UNESCO, 2005; Pye 2003; Mitra, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005). In Thailand during 2001-2002 the Office of the Non-Formal Education Commission initialized a project which aimed to develop a prototype computer software package for literacy and post-literacy education. In the Thai project participants created a website for advertising community products, the young ones achieving their empowerment established a "brain bank" for setting up small-scale enterprises, they created a guesthouse where eco-tourism was promoted assisted of Buddhist meditation or mindfulness practices as part of the ICT project, data of medicine herbal texts in local Lanna script was translated by youngs who were motivated to learn the traditional Lanna language, and connectivity among villagers from various rural learning communities was encouraged. In the Sri Lanka project the purpose was to help village entrepreneurs by enabling them to use ICT in marketing and selling their products. As for this village information centers were established and youngs formed "information circles" to provide information on the use of ICT, "telecentres" provided technical support for ICT in order to build an effective network for rural e-commerce, village banks were established and were linked with the telecentres, databases containing information related to rural matters

promoted the products of the small-scale enterprises in poor village communities, and villagers became computer literate. The NFE Department of the Lao PDR implemented a project on the use of ICT to increase village incomes amongst rural ethnic minority Hmong youth and adults. By using CDs community people upgraded their traditional knowledge of farming and other professional skills and radio broadcasting in the mother tongue over a loudspeaker helped village people to get involved in CLC activities. The Uzbek Republican Education Center of the Ministry of Public Education implemented a project involving CLCs in both urban and rural areas targeting the social transformation through community empowerment by applying ICT to the education process. The results were, the development of an effective community database, networking for sharing experiences, development of resource materials, cooperation with NGOs and improvement of literacy skills (UNESCO, 2005). In Sub-Saharan Africa the project's objective was the setting up of a Pan Africa women-led telecenters ecosystem and it's results were the realization of training programs on computer skills, the improvement of equal access to ICTs and the integration of gender perspective in community, commercial and government activities (Pye, 2003). In India the Hole-in-the-Wall project conducted in India since 1999 by Sugata Mitra had as objective the construction of a minimally invasive education learning model to test the hypothesis that if appropriate resources are provided, children aged 6–14 can achieve computer literacy unsupervised. Its results showed that children can self-instruct themselves to operate computers. Their ability to do so seemed to be independent of their: educational background, literacy levels in English, social or economic level, ethnicity and place of origin, gender, genetic background, geographic location and intelligence (Mitra, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005). The above examples from programmes on "ICTs for community empowerment through NFE" are not the only that could be presented in this paper. But they were chosen as their results could be used as data to rely on for ICT policymakers in Greece.

The setting

The population of Roma people today in all Thrace is estimated to be around 18.000-25000 people (Mavrommatis, 2005), most of them Muslims, and a part of them Orthodox Christians. The position of the Roma on the labor market is very problematic. Generally, access to basic services is extremely limited for Roma, as they are a clear example of a minority group suffering severe discrimination, prejudice, social and economic marginalization. Joblessness; due to low qualification and inability to react flexibly to the needs of the labour market; low educational level, force evictions from their settlements and exclusion from the educational system or very high drop-outs from schools, barriers to access to health care and other social support services, high rates of infant mortality, life expectancy 20 years less than

the average, and miserable living conditions in settlements at the edge of the towns and villages or urban ghettoes seem to be inherited from generation to generation (Kárpáti, 2004).

During the academic year 2006-2007 the Greek Organization of Labor Exchange (OAED) and the "Occupational Training", S.A, OAED's branch in East Macedonia and Thrace, organized a computer training seminar for 110 women in Thrace (it consists of Xanthi, Rodopi and Evros prefectures) as a part of a European financed program under the name "Special actions for training in Thrace, 2000-2006". The courses of the 450 hours computer training program were delivered during a four months period from December 2006 until March 2007, in the computer lab of a high school at Komotini. Twenty women living in the area of Komotini attended the program and seven of these women were Roma. All of them were Muslims, working as street vendors in local markets or as domestic housewives and lived in a particular area of the city, known as the "Alan-Koyu" or "Tin Neighborhood", in 50 sheds or other impromptu structures with communal toilets, with no land ownership; but with electricity, running water, and sewage provided; not easily accessible. In addition, Roma's low percentage of Thrace's total population (less than 10%) and their unwillingness to participate in surveys, also contributed to the difficulty of a successful random sampling process. Their age ranges were: 18-29 (2), 30-39 (4), 40-49 (1). The second research group involves 8 women living at Aratos, a village near by Komotini, all Orthodox Christians. Their age ranges were: 18-29(2), 30-39(2), 40-49(4), and working as street vendors in local markets or as domestic housewives, living in proper houses, under tolerable conditions. The 600 hours seminar they attended had as its subject the "Setting up of small enterprises", and was delivered from August 2007 until March 2008.

Results

Muslim Roma women never had found themselves before in a schoolyard; never had attended lessons in a classroom, and some of their interviews were given in Turkish as their knowledge of the Greek language was very limited. From the group of the Christian Roma women all had received primary education, 2 had received 1 year of secondary education, and were good speakers of the Greek language. The experience of these programmes made them more flexible to speak and thoughts for attending lessons at the second chance primary school came into discussion. The use of computers helped them, by copying letters and words on the screen, to identify letters, to make formats, and even at the end they were able to right their names and sentences. One of them who could read and write was even able to respond to the Excel exercises that were taught.

Women from the second group appreciated the knowledge provided during the seminar on how to create a small enterprise or how to type up a CV. Women

recognised that if they had the energy and a "mind for business", they could go ahead in small business. In the "Setting up of small enterprises" training program, computer use was taught in a theoretical approach due to lack of a computer lab, in the area the program was carried out. Nevertheless, they did understand what the computer could offer them to "built" their own enterprise and asked for further training seminars on compute use. They expressed a need for computer literacy to improve e-commerce. Although the researcher provided them immediate information to start training program on computer use, the women at Aratos village due to lack of transportation to the private training centre in the city, as they were not able to pay for everyday transportation, and they did not know how to drive, finally did not grasp at the chance to improve their skills. The need for women, to get together more often, to exchange views, to see what other women are doing and saying in terms of development, was mentioned with agony, as distance and isolation were highlighted as serious problems for Roma women. Some saw the NFE activity encouraging them to participate in community activities and just as many expressed a confident determination to pursue their "dreams".

All women had cell phone and all of them were addicted to television. They all had television sets in their houses and satellite antennas on the roofs. Muslim Roma women did not know what an Internet café is. On the other hand the Christian Roma women did know, as there was an Internet café in their village, where their children frequent there. But the women never went there as it was considered a place for kids.

We faced a need of mediators for approaching Roma women, especially the Muslim Roma women who had limited knowledge of Greek language and were totally illiterate. Only one of them did not allow the researcher to take pictures of her, as she was afraid of how her husband might react. The group of Christian Roma women during the interview arranged a coffee time in one of the houses of the women who attended the program. That was permitted after her husband had a meeting with the researcher and the reason for the research was explained to him. Generally, the Roma women from Aratos were positive to participate in the interview but hesitated about photos. The researcher had to do all the reactions mentioned above in order to build a conversational partnership with the Roma women and have the chance to obtain fruitful interviews.

Discussion and conclusions

During the training programs it was observed that for Roma women digital literacy has proven an important competence able to act as a means for further education re-boosting their motivation to learn and acquire other basic skills such as reading and writing and communicating in different contexts. This observation let us think

that their literacy and numeric skills might be achieved through digital literacy if a favourable Government policy could assist the development of special models for teaching Roma people. ICTs may support learning of their mother tongue and of Greek language through NFE programs (see examples from Thailand and Uzbekistan). Scaling up social excluded ICT-related projects for poverty reduction, depends on the project providing useful services that are driven by the real needs of the local community, for an adequate training and development of the local people, but it also depends on achieving this with effective local skilled staff, that can maintain high levels of community acceptance, within centres that are financially sound. Mentors from the Roma community should be trained to teach in NFE programs in order to succeed more efficient tuition, highly motivated, qualified, as they will be probably more "willing" and aware of the level of the students, otherwise, the mission of NFE programs to innovate and transform, will be unfulfilled. The development and improvement of the "qualification", motivation and performance of teachers for teaching to socially excluded groups is a challenge. Improving the performance of teachers, therefore, will be an exercise in improving the utilization of scarce resources. As for this, the creation of ICT research centres and training institutions in Thrace, to provide qualifications to teachers who teach people from socially exclude groups, should be a priority. Channels that interact with their way of living must be the informants for their benefits of the information society and of providing them with ICT infrastructure. Also voluntarism for teachers, trainers and mentors, who want to offer their knowledge and experiences on ICT use and literacy to members of socially excluded groups, could be encouraged by a reduce of their taxes or other subsidies.

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