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Female's self-concept as online learners in the context of lifelong learning in prisons

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ABSTRACT

Adult education and training policies have supported inclusive practices for universal access to opportunities for the development of important lifelong learning (LL) skills. The implementation of these policies is especially relevant for socially vulnerable groups, including individuals who are incarcerated. Taking this situation as a reference, a study was developed to answer the questions: How do female adults who participated in an LL e-learning training course in prison perceive themselves as learners? What are the learners' perceptions about the online learning training, framed in an LL context? Data collected through two questionnaires and a focus group revealed a history of academic failure and negative repercussions of incarceration on the self but also showed evidence of the ability to learn through technology and an effort towards self-improvement. The results indicate that the development of digital learning skills in prison may foster psychosocial development, which is crucial to perceiving a self with the ability for LL.

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Introduction

In a network society (Castells, 2000), information and communication technologies (ICT) acquire centrality, which influences adult education and training policies (European Association for the Education of Adults, 2019). Policies about lifelong learning developed at regional and international levels have promoted universal participation for an inclusive society and evoked humanistic principles. These principles point to the possibility to conceive learning processes in multiple spaces, during different life stages and with various formats, translates into a considerable advancement in the access to learning opportunities.

The universality of participation in education evokes humanistic principles that support the paradigm of LL and enable the grounds for the development of an inclusive society. Inclusivity based on humanistic principles is one of the purposes underlying the discourse and documents that emanate from the main intergovernmental organisations that guide educational interventions on a global scale (Elfert, 2019). According to (UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2012), it is precisely these premises that are reflected in major international declarations, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 26.1), the Dakar Declaration on Millennium Development Goals (2000), the Declaration of Principles of the

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World Summit on the Information Society (2003), and the International Conferences on Adult Education (UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2010).

In the European context, LL has become imperative in the construction of a new model of social cohesion. Notwithstanding the market logic that underpins the ‘Lisbon Strategy’ (Commission of the European Communities, 2000) and the ‘Europe 2020 Strategy’ (European Commission, 2010), the European social model suggests that ‘all citizens must have the necessary qualifications to live and work in the new information society’ (Commission of the European Communities, 2000, p. 13). This intention often clashes with social realities where inequalities are evident, particularly regarding the possibility of participating in LL activities. Such clashes and inequalities are notable in the case of adults’ access to lifelong learning opportunities in prison.

In Portugal, the Joint Order 451/MJ/ME, of 1 June 1999 (between the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Education), regulates teaching within prisons at the level of all education grades, as a way of making up for the low levels of schooling of the prisoner population, following the model of the Adult Education and Training Courses of the national territory. As stated in the official documentation of the Directorate General for Reinsertion and Prison Services (DGRSP Directorate General for Reinsertion and Prison Services, 2021), prison establishments must ensure that the prisoners have the necessary conditions for their formal education and enlarge possibilities to attend non-formal learning activities. Related to formal education, the joint order provides basic education programs (1st to 9th degree), as well as secondary education (10th to 12th degree) and vocational courses for adults. There are also possibilities to attend higher education.

Related to non-formal education, and taking into account the importance of digital literacy for social inclusion, the joint order states that prison establishments should provide conditions for prisoners to develop digital competencies. However, in most European countries, prisons offer limited access to Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and the internet (Demiray et al., 2016; Farley & Hopkins, 2017; Manger et al., 2019; Renbarger et al., 2019). According to Hawley et al. (2013), ‘prisoners in Europe tend to have limited access to ICT and the internet, which is often related to concerns about the associated security risks and a perception that access to technology is a “luxury” which does not correlate with the prison regime’ (p. 34).

A study carried out in 2013 by the European Prison Observatory stated that there is ‘a lack of resources, the types of courses and opportunities offered are often limited (...)’. Despite the existence of informal education programmes and the wide range of distance learning programmes offered by the UK, France, Spain, Portugal, and other countries, prisoners can rarely afford to take up these opportunities because of the high costs (Maculan et al., 2013) or the programmes present other barriers, such as ‘a lack of interest on the part of many inmates’ (p. 56).

A study conducted in a Portuguese prison, focused on digital learning environments, concluded that technology can foster diversification of teaching resources, as well as a pedagogical discourse open to sociocultural diversity (Monteiro & Leite, 2016). Therefore, learning through engagement in digital networks can contribute to avoiding social exclusion and justify the idea of promoting digital literacy in contexts such as prisons in order to support social inclusion. ‘Distance education provides many opportunities with its learner-focused approach for lifelong learning due to the flexibility it offers for teaching and learning at a distance’ (Barkan et al., 2011, p. 237). Therefore, technological and pedagogical learning opportunities may provide solutions to combat social and digital exclusion.

In the specific case of the prisoner population, characterised by under-developed basic skills (literacy, numeracy, and language), and by a history of recurring academic failure, the barriers to participation in LL activities become more intelligible (Hawley et al., 2013; Rangel, 2007). Yet, involvement in LL is crucial for the development of prisoners’ knowledge and their future social and labour reintegration (Manger et al., 2019) and represents a significant need for LL (Biswal, 2011). Therefore, encouraging greater participation in learning inside prison can contribute to developing a lifelong learner profile. According to Peacock and Cowan (2017), the lifelong learner profile includes the following: skills that promote conditions for knowledge construction; the ability to

understand and apply knowledge; capacity for judgement and decision-making; capability of selecting relevant information with ethical concerns; proper organisation and communication of relevant information; and higher-level cognitive and interpersonal abilities such as critical and creative thinking.

In the context of adult prison education, until very recently the extent of association between the development of cognitive skills, such as those mentioned above, and adult LL was unclear. In this regard, Galeshi et al. (2020) published a study to explore the relationship between educational attainment, adult cognitive skill proficiency, LL, and social outcomes among prisoners. Concerning adult LL, as being one of the human capital variables, the results are in line with prior research (e.g. Vera-Toscano et al., 2017) that highlights the positive relationship between adult LL and social outcomes, such as political efficacy, interpersonal trust, and health perception.

Overemphasis on basic skills is still a trend in European Union (EU) LL policies and may not address the multiple and complex needs of some vulnerable populations (Tuparevska et al., 2019), such as prisoners. This overemphasis on the basic skills concept encompasses the increasing tendency of EU policies to focus on traditional basic skills such as literacy and numeracy, neglecting other key skills that would allow the vulnerable to be critical and active citizens.

Taking into account the importance of LL that goes beyond basic skills, especially for those in a vulnerable situation, a study was developed to identify the perceptions of female learners, who were participants in an e-learning training course in a prison setting. The study which is the focus of this paper explored the women participants' perceptions of themselves as learners on a programme designed within a lifelong learning agenda that provided more than basic skills. The study was framed by the ideas in the literature mentioned above that suggest that digital learning environments can contribute to removing barriers to learning inside prisons and also that learner's self-concept is a changing psychological variable essential to understanding the education process in a given learning context.

Research on prisoners' participation in learning activities traditionally focuses on institutional and situational barriers (Manger et al., 2019). The study presented in this paper contradicts this tendency by privileging internal (dispositional) aspects, which are related to the learners' self-perceptions as learners. This understanding is particularly relevant for the design of a more diversified and personalised training/education program since lack of motivation and previous negative experiences in education have been identified as the most common barriers to women's participation in lifelong learning activities (Barros, Monteiro & Leite, 2022). In the case of learners in prisons, Kamoyo (2018) observed low to moderate levels of self-esteem, associated with greater self-centeredness and feelings of inferiority, a fact that may be associated with the negative impact of the prison environment.

Taking into consideration the above, the study presented in this paper aims to answer the following questions: 'How do female adults who participated in an LL e-learning training course in prison perceive themselves as learners? What are the learners' perceptions about online learning training, framed in an LL context?

The paper's structure starts with the theoretical framework, which justifies the importance of enhancing the digital inclusion of female learners in prison and introduces the relevance of the self-concept of learning in a prison context. After this contextual framework, methodological options and procedures are presented, followed by the results. The analysis, results, and discussion section interpret the findings related to how these female adults perceive themselves as learners and how they view the LL opportunity they have experienced. This section is followed by the conclusions.

E-learning in prison

The current challenges of the knowledge society support the LL paradigm and contemporary educational practices, requiring access to ICT and the internet. Learning supported by ICT is

fundamental for the development of digital skills, namely for effective communication and for the understanding and critical evaluation of online content.

In the context of knowledge needs related to labour and daily life, the use of e-learning is an important tool to encourage prisoners not only to develop digital literacy skills, but also to promote psychosocial skills (Apostopoulou et al., 2004). More recently, UNESCO (2022a), referring to the prison context, emphasises the need to 'advance digital inclusion through shared and cost-effective access to ICTs' (p. 91). This is particularly relevant since prisoners are one of the groups still most likely to miss opportunities to learn with digital technologies (Stanistreet, 2022).

Access to the internet and digital devices in prisons is included in the goal of providing learners in prison with educational tools to foster their social reintegration (Mertanen & Brunila, 2018), thus helping to promote multiple types of literacy, so as to bridge the gap between prison and society, which, currently, is not only social but also digital (Rocha, 2016). This access, according to this last author, aims to create conditions for prisoners to be able to understand and follow technological and social changes and evolutions that will allow them to successfully readapt in the future and to develop technological and informational skills and competencies integrated with a broader concept of literacy, where informative, personal, and social dimensions are not dissociated (Burgos Oliván et al., 2007).

Following this aim, e-learning projects have been developed in prisons, funded by European LL programs, and involving different countries (e.g. EPEA European Prison Education Association, 2008; LICOS Learning Infrastructure for Correctional Services, 2010). Some of the countries involved in these projects found their own solutions, such as the Elis project, developed by Germany and Austria; the Virtual Campus project, developed by the United Kingdom; and the 'internet for inmates' project, developed by Norway. As has been stated, e-learning training courses in a prison context may be conditioned by difficulties related to technology, the structure, and functioning of the prison, the characteristics of the e-learning training course itself, or the profiles of the learners (Lockett, 2011). The success of e-learning training courses depends on the learner's knowledge, their involvement in the learning processes, as well as the strategies that can be developed to encourage this involvement (Monteiro, Barros & Leite, 2015; Monteiro & Leite, 2016). Thus, education in prison contexts should take into account not only the ontological essence of the individual, but also the context in which the individual is inserted and, therefore, should be oriented towards encouraging him/her (Rocha, 2016). In this trajectory, teachers and/or educators acquire a very important role, helping individuals to redirect their learning focus to their own needs, preferences, and demands; and helping them acquire the necessary knowledge for their professional (re)integration, self-realisation, and self-motivation, with the goal of overcoming the ways of being and living that led the individual to be incarcerated (Batra et al., 2012). Education in prison contexts is expected to contribute to 'humanisation, awareness and training' (Onofre, 2009, p. 10) of prisoners, based on plural and multidisciplinary educational program, involving the participation of professionals from various fields (Mertanen & Brunila, 2018; Rogers et al., 2014).

There are several aspects to consider when designing learning environments, including the context and teaching strategies. It is essential to use stimulating practices that enable learners to, in a healthy way, identify with, and relate to, the knowledge now obtained in the context of incarceration (Hurry et al., 2005). For learners in prison with low motivation or with prior poor school experiences, direct interaction with learning is very important.

This interaction, experienced within a regular relationship of studying, with teachers, educators, or tutors, and the objectives to be achieved, allows learners in prison to feel integrated into a social group outside of incarceration, which can result in a positive self-identity (Pike, 2014). It is with this idea in mind that a study was developed to identify the perceptions that female adults, involved in training courses mediated by digital technologies in prison, have of themselves as learners.

Self-concept of learning in a prison context

As mentioned before, the learning process in a prison context is influenced by multiple conditions, in which intrinsic and dispositional aspects (attitudinal, motivational, and psychological) are inserted. These include the self-concept of learning. Thus, it becomes relevant to know how prisoners perceive themselves as learners and how they perceive learning, namely the one that takes place in virtual environments.

Self-concept of learning refers to an individual's perception of him/herself as a learner and to the assessment of the skills that he/she believes to have, as an individual involved in a particular learning process, when compared with individuals in his/her peer group (Lima & Seco, 1990; Zhan & Mei, 2013). Thus, the self-concept of learning appears as an essential element for understanding the educational process, as well as a psychological variable, which due to its dynamic and multidimensional organisation is also influenced by the interactions that take place in the learning context.

The self-concept of learners in prison and the lack of confidence that many of them have about their ability to learn come from dispositional barriers to participating in educational activities. These barriers are connected to attitudes and perceptions about themselves as learners (Hopkins & Farley, 2014; Manger et al., 2019). Thus, it is important to investigate prisoners' perceptions of themselves when in prison (e.g. Hopkins & Farley, 2014; Roth et al., 2016).

The variables of the self-system condition the processes of socialisation in prison contexts, and these processes are dependent, among other factors, on pre-incarceration social experience (B. Brent & Orr, 2016). Recent studies (Basílio et al., 2017; Kamoyo, 2018) have demonstrated the influence of the prison experience on the self-system and, in particular, the negative influences of the prison experience on self-concept. The same is true for the self-concept of learning, since, as mentioned by Rosário et al. (2016), the prison context is unique and impacts the prisoner's relationship with learning. In the case of female prisoners, low to moderate levels of self-esteem and reports of uselessness have also been identified (Kamoyo, 2018). If we reverse this logic, in the direction that learning in a prison context becomes gratifying, it becomes possible to conceive education in this context as an opportunity for the development and reorganisation of academic self-concept. In other words, learning provided in prison contexts may have a positive influence on the self-perception of individuals as learners (Graciano & Schilling, 2008), thus overcoming, in most cases, a history of failure and frustration in the act of learning. Prisoners' involvement in educational activities offers opportunities to prove their abilities and competencies as adult learners, a key issue for self-esteem enhancement in a learning context (Farley et al., 2016; Mertanen & Brunila, 2018; Pike, 2014). On the other hand, the sense of academic self-efficacy in some learners may be explained through peer comparison processes, as proposed by the big-fish-little-pond effect (Marsh & Parker, 1984). The study conducted by Rosário et al. (2016) with Portuguese learners in prisons corroborates the existence of this effect and, in addition, highlights the importance of addressing their opinions and ideas about their involvement in learning activities, regarding the organisation of educational programs to be developed in prison contexts. Manger et al. (2019, p. 729) also point out that 'Behind bars, these prisoners are also likely to find other standards of comparison than on the outside and use this relativistic impression as a basis for forming their self-concept (Roth et al., 2016). Nevertheless, according to some authors (Hawley et al., 2013; Maculan et al., 2013), a large group of learners in prison see their learning difficulties and other personal problems as obstacles to participating in learning activities.

All these arguments justify the need to deepen knowledge about the self-concept of the learners in prison contexts, particularly related to learning mediated by digital resources. Investigating this issue may provide clues for their greater involvement in online training offerings.

Methodology

The methodology adopted followed an interpretative orientation, using quantitative and qualitative data. The interpretative orientation, according to Smith et al. (2009) is committed to understanding how people make sense of their life experiences, on their own terms. The study followed interpretative research principles defined by Bhattacharjee, (2012): the phenomena are studied within their natural setting; researchers' experiences of the prison context are essential to interpreting the results, and the learners in prison perception embedded in the prison context was analysed to provide a better understanding of the meaning of the participants' experiences.

In relation to the research context, according to the Activities and Self-Assessment Report, from the DGRSP [Directorate General for Reinsertion and Prison Services] (2021), the female prison where the study was developed includes 306 prisoners and an occupancy rate of 86,9%. An intentional sample of nine female learners in prison (here identified as F1 . . . F9) was defined by convenience.

The participants' ages are within the range of 24 to 49 years old, with a period of incarceration between 0,5 and 90 months and a sentencing period between 55 and 252 months. Regarding their education levels, one participant attends the 9th grade, one attends the 10th grade, four attend the 12th grade, one attends university, and two did not indicate their education level. Existing research studies (Barros & Monteiro, 2015; Pike & Adams, 2012; Ryder, 2020) argue that many women in prisons have experienced challenges in their life course and family life that have impacted on a higher incidence of dispositions and situations that are barriers to their engagement with LL. These dispositions and situations include low self-esteem, low levels of education, low professional qualifications and academic paths of failure, lack of autonomy, low tolerance to frustration, need for positive reinforcement, high drop-out rates, and lack of motivation.

All participants took part in a 250-hour e-learning training course, using a virtual learning environment mediated through the Moodle platform, organised into three major modules (Familiarisation to the Moodle Platform; Microsoft Office; Educational Dynamics in the Family Environment), which focused on developing skills and stimulating interest in learning. The intention was to bring these specific learning approaches into the prison aiming to achieve target audience training and contribute to their further social knowledge (Barros & Monteiro, 2015).

In line with what has been said by Cooney (2018), becoming a learner in prison is particularly challenging for women. It is usual to identify cases of disrupted education, been expelled from school, being taken into care, absence and drop out historical. In the particular case of the participants in this study, most of them are mothers and had to leave their children in the care of relatives. In this prison, only the children up to 3 years old can stay with their mother. On the one hand, the family can be a supportive role and an inspiration for learning, especially in the case of children. On the other hand, the family may condition the investment in learning, considering the life trajectories marked by family violence and that are often responsible for the imprisonment itself, in cases of passionate homicide, more characteristic of the female inmate population. Another aspect to highlight are the cases of mental illness, many of the learners are medicated with tranquillisers and antidepressants which sometimes have an effect on their level of attention and motivation to learn. The module 'Educational Dynamics in the Family Environment' was designed to support the women in learning to deal with such challenges in their lives.

Data were collected using two questionnaires and a focus group. The first questionnaire, with eight open questions, was made available from November to December 2017, in the Moodle setting of the training course and contained questions about LL, such as: formal educational contexts (relationship with school); non-formal educational contexts (enrolment and attendance of training courses); and informal educational contexts ('life experience'). This questionnaire was answered by all learners. The second questionnaire, applied in person, in May of 2018, was the SCAL 'Self-

Concept as a Learner' (Waetjen, 1972, adapted by Veiga, 1996) and was answered by seven of the nine learners. In addition to being adapted to the Portuguese population, the scale has a good internal consistency (α value = 0.89) and was used previously in studies focused on virtual learning environments (Moreira, 2015; Moreira, Barros & Monteiro, 2015).

It is an instrument comprising 42 items, answered on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 to 6 points. Items are divided into four dimensions:

- Motivation (MO): Learner perception about herself, regarding her enjoyment and interest in the training course, the difficulties in paying attention and in remembering instructions;
- Task orientation (TO): The care with which the learner conducts her work. It refers to the effort to properly perform the tasks in a timely manner;
- Problem-solving ability (PS): The trust the learner deposits in her skills and ideas. It relates to the perception of ease in obtaining good academic results;
- Class membership (CM): Related to the type of integration of the learner in the class and to the perception of trust received from the peer group.

The data collected by this SCAL questionnaire was analysed through simple descriptive statistics, using the SPSS-v24. The results based on data obtained through questionnaires were triangulated with the focus group's debate.

The focus group occurred in August of 2018, within the prison, with the participation of seven learners.

The data collected in the first questionnaire and focus group were subjected to content analysis (Bardin, 1977). This analysis, performed with the support of NVivo12 software, had the following steps: pre-analysis (fluctuating reading); exploring the material (coding and categorisation), having as the unit of analysis the excerpts of the discourses with pre-existing categories (extracted from the literature review in line with the study's objective); and data processing and interpretation of the results according to the study research questions. The categories for analysis included LL experiences, motivations, perceptions, and training courses. The data processing included the following steps: coding, extracting excerpts, comparing, and interpreting according to the theoretical support. The descriptive nature of this research does not allow any causal inferences or statements about the effectiveness of the digital learning program.

Following ethical procedures, the study was authorised by the General Directorate for Reintegration and Prison Services of the Portuguese Ministry of Justice. After authorisation by the prison establishment and the staff approval, the researchers ensured that the participants understood what was involved in the study, how that information would be used, and how and to whom it could be reported before signing the informed consent. Participants were assured and informed of the right to free and voluntary participation, without financial compensation, as well as the right to withdraw from the research at any time. The confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data was also guaranteed, in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679 – GDPR and the respective Portuguese application regulation (Law No. 58/2019 of 8 August).

Considering both the categorical (being prisoners) and contextual vulnerability (institutional, deferential and social issues; Gordon, 2020), some special measures were taken into account that acknowledged the power dynamics of a prison setting. For example, following the ethical guidelines stated by the learned society, British Educational Research Association BERA, (2018): it was clarified that the study involved no risks, inclusion (or not) in the research study did not change the learner's status in the prison, or treatment in prison in any way; specific information about the learners was not reported back to the prison authorities. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the proposing university and monitoring and review of procedures were ensured whenever necessary.

Results

The results are presented organised according to the two research questions previously formulated: *How do female adults who participated in an LL e-learning training course in prison perceive themselves as learners? What are the learners' perceptions about online learning training, framed in an LL context?*

The findings related to the first question were built on the results of the first questionnaire (LL), and from each dimension of the self-concept as learners, assessed through SCAL. The LL open questions reveal how the female adults see themselves as learners throughout life, taking as its starting point a reflection on their previous learning experiences in different contexts, informal, non-formal, and formal. Regarding informal contexts, when asked about the role of 'life experience' in their development, all participants reported having learned a lot from their friends, parents, boyfriend, co-workers, and older people, as well as from their own mistakes and experiences. Among these learnings, they mention personal suffering as a less positive situation. The following statements provide examples of this:

'In my case, the school of life was a big source of learning; although, I learned a lot from great suffering' (F1).

'Life itself has taught me many important things, but just because they were important does not mean they were good things, many were bad, but I learned a lot from them' (F5).

Regarding non-formal learning contexts, only two female trainees reported not having attended vocational training courses beyond compulsory education. Those who reported having participated in training courses mentioned the following: entrepreneurship, ICT, English, Spanish, human resources management, hospitality, hydro balneotherapy, and educational assistant.

Regarding formal contexts, the learners were asked about school, having reported positive and negative perceptions, including situations of dropping out. Examples are:

- Positive perceptions

'School was a very happy period in my life. I really enjoyed being in school and it has been very useful for me' (F1).

'My opinion about school is good; although, during the time I was in school, I did not know how to make the most of it' (F2).

- Negative perceptions

'At a certain age I completely lost all interest in school' (F4).

'Was it enjoyable to attend school? No. Was it useful to attend school? More or less. Do I think I was a good student? Not really' (F3).

- Situations of dropping out

'Unfortunately, I had to drop out of school because it was what my parents wanted' (F1).

'Compulsory education was in the 9th grade, and I continued until dropping out in the 11th grade. Obviously, the goal was to finish and try to get into a university and finish the course, but for personal reasons, I was unable and had to drop out' (F5).

'School is a professional and personal asset. I have always liked attending school (from 1st to 12th grade), and I even got into university, but because of bad choices, I dropped out' (F9).

To know the inmate's self-concept as a learner, a SCAL was applied. Table 1 presents the mean results for each dimension under analysis.

Table 1. Mean results for the SCAL.

Dimensions	Mean (1–6)
Motivation	4.24
Task orientation	4.78
Problem-solving ability	4.01
Class membership	4.87

Although, on average, these female prisoners have positive perceptions about the dimensions of students' self-concept. Data in Table 1 show a slightly less positive perception of 'problem-solving ability' and a more positive perception of 'class membership'. To further the analysis, the items with the highest and lowest scores in each dimension are presented.

In the 'motivation' dimension, the answers given in the focus group reflect the difficulties experienced in the educational trajectory and poor resistance to frustration, as the following statements exemplify:

'People, I think, did not understand the contents, perhaps it was a bit harder (F1).

'During this phase of the course, I experienced the worst phase of a learner, which is the phase of laments, where I had many sessions, whether or not I will get out, the sentence, facing the reality of my life in here, the number of years I got. I performed my job in the workshops. I brought work into my cell because I have no help from the outside. I go to bed at two or three in the morning after work' (F6).

Most of the learners mentioned that they prefer to have more physical presence of the teacher and to be free to explore internet resources whenever they want.

As shown in Table 2, these female learners in prison have less positive perceptions about the 'motivation' dimension, presenting a lower resistance to frustration when they do not understand the contents covered in the classes, however, it is consensual that they do not use dishonest methods to obtain gains in their learning.

Regarding 'task orientation', it was analysed the care with which learners performed their work. Table 3 presents the items with the highest and lowest scores.

Personal effort and the attempt to overcome difficulties were mentioned by these learners in the focus group, as the following statements show:

'I think this requires a lot of personal organisation and effort. Moreover, without effort we cannot achieve anything. And when someone really wants something and makes an effort, I think they end up winning something' (F9).

'I think it has nothing to do with my effort, it has to do with the fact that I was unable to manage everything at once, but I tried my best' (F6).

Table 2. Items with highest and lowest SCAL scores – motivation.

Motivation	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	mode	mean
'I do not understand what goes on in class'	6	6	5	6	5	5	6	6	5.57
'If I do not understand something, I give up'	6	6	5	5	6	3	6	6	5.29

Table 3. Items with highest and lowest SCAL scores – task orientation.

Task orientation	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	mode	mean
'When I know I am doing something wrong, I try to change'	6	5	6	6	6	5	6	6	5.75
'I make an effort to understand the points of view of others'	6	6	5	6	6	6	5	6	5.71

Table 4. Items with highest and lowest SCAL scores – problem-solving.

Problem Solving	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	mode	mean
'I know the answers before the rest of the class'	6	6	4	6	6	5	3	6	5.14
'I am an important person for my colleagues in the training course'	4	4	4	4	1	1	4	4	3.14

Table 5. Items with the highest and lowest SCAL scores – class membership.

Class membership	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	mode	mean
'I make an effort to understand the points of view of others'	6	6	5	6	6	6	5	6	5.71
'My classmates do not trust me'	1	3	2	1	4	4	2	1	2.43
'I am not interested in what my classmates do'	6	6	5	5	6	6	6	6	5.71
'I feel left out in my class'	6	6	5	6	6	5	6	6	5.71

The dimension 'problem-solving ability' analyses the trust these learners have in their abilities and ideas, and relates to the perception of ease in obtaining good academic results. Table 4 presents items with the highest and lowest scores in this dimension.

This was the dimension with the lowest mean value in comparison with the remaining dimensions of the SCAL. From the focus group emerges evidence of behaviours of competition and comparison between these learners and, at the same time, a lack of confidence in their own ability to learn, due to some conditioning factors, such as the following: lack of time, death of relatives, problematic situations within and outside the prison, excessive workload, and excessive tasks. The excerpt presented below provides an account of this perception.

'Unfortunately, my grandfather passed away not long ago, and I cannot face it, I still cannot assimilate it. I did not feel capable for' (F2).

The dimension of 'class membership' is associated with the type of integration of the learner in the class and with the perception of trust received from the peer group. Table 5 presents items with the highest and lowest scores in this dimension.

This was the dimension with the highest scores in this group, when assessing self-concept of learning. This aspect was evident, during the focus group, which revealed rifts with the impact of perceived trust received from the peer group stated that:

'I apologise to the group, but I have to be honest: this was the worst group I have ever been in' (F1).

'Outside of this class, I was lucky to be with [F5] in class, and we have always had this interaction, more or less, within our possibilities, because there is also work and I have so much to do and I already have precariousness and everything ...' (F1).

'The lack of communication is apparent ... we do not communicate' (F5).

The results regarding the SCAL item 'class membership' (presented in Table 5) and some of the focus group references may support the idea that there are some relationship issues, which can hinder peer communication (e.g.: focus group references regarding lack of communication and questionnaire score regarding 'feeling left out of class' – 5,71 out of 6 – and 'not being interesting in what other classmates do' – 5,71 out of 6). However, there is a tendency to agree that training is a means of improving attitudes and of error correction, in an effort to understand others' points of view, as presented in Table 3 regarding 'task orientation'.

The key findings regarding the first question, according to the LL questionnaire results, indicate previous difficulties experienced in the educational trajectory of these women, as evidenced in the negative perceptions expressed in the focus groups, and the low resistance to frustration. SCAL global results (presented in Table 1) points to a positive self-perception as learners, nevertheless indicating a slight lack of confidence in their own problem-solving abilities. These abilities were developed during the online training.

Perceptions about the online learning training

The findings related to the second question, ‘What are the learners’ perceptions about online learning training’, were based on the data obtained from the focus group.

These females considered that the e-learning training course goals were achieved and manifested the will to continue their studies, resorting to long-distance learning modalities. This fact is also visible, for example, in the following statements:

‘I really wanted to go to university and I did not think that it would be difficult to manage to be in here and not be able to leave, but maybe in an e-learning context. I will continue my studies, of course (F1).

‘Continue university. I will continue to manage everything’ (F3).

It is possible to identify some negative and positive aspects. The negative aspects can be related to some frustration and difficulty understanding the content and dealing with the internet access restriction, which increased their predisposition to quit. Most of the trainees mentioned that they prefer to have a more physical presence of the teacher.

The participants also reported difficulties to follow the online component of the training modules and do not perform the proposed autonomous tasks during the stipulated period, which has an effect on the difficulty of understanding the content and activities performed in face-to-face sessions.

The positive aspects are related to the possibility of diversifying the means and increasing the LL opportunities offered inside prison. In fact, online training is perceived as an opportunity that, along with the satisfaction derived from the learning process and the interactions it provides, may contribute to the perception of personal success. The testimonies of the participants reveal this:

“I really look like I’m here in a corner, but it turns out I’m not, it’s because someone remembered me. I thought: will I be able to do it? And that was my doubt. I thought: the director gave me this opportunity and maybe I won’t be able to do it like my colleagues. (. . .). But now that I am in the course and started to do it, this was a learning experience for me and I was trying to value myself more and start to look at myself and say: you can do it and you have the capacity” (F9).

“Mainly, we who are stuck here have to show that we want to do something, both in here and outside. And that this that we are doing, when we receive the certificates, will be of service to us outside. (. . .). I like to learn, whatever it is, I like to learn. It’s being part of something, being there, seeing, witnessing, participating. I want to take this and I want to take my certificate outside (F7).

In sum, the main findings related to the second question – online learning training, framed in an LL context – showed that the participants were satisfied with the online training and, therefore, wish to continue learning in this modality. They also recognised the importance of the training to increase learning opportunities. However, they struggle against barriers related to dispositional aspects, technical issues, predisposition to quit and difficulty understanding the contents.

Discussion

In line with the need to ensure that prisoners have the necessary conditions for their formal education and increase possibilities to attend non-formal learning activities (DGRSP [Directorate General for Reinsertion and Prison Services], 2021), an e-learning training course was implemented in a female prison, in a non-formal context. This training focused on the development of digital skills, a dimension with serious gaps in the prison system (Manger et al., 2019; Renbarger et al., 2019).

The training model aimed to overcome the barrier of learners’ lack of interest in learning in prisons and motivation to join lifelong learning tasks (Maculan et al., 2013). In this regard, the study asked trainees about their previous lifelong learning experiences and their self-concept as learners (research question 1), privileging internal (dispositional) aspects over institutional and situational ones (Manger et al., 2019), and about their perception of the training offered (research question 2).

The results presented in what concerns LL experiences are in line with the studies of Hawley et al. (2013) and Rangel (2007), when they argue that the prisoner population is characterised by a history of recurring academic failure. The learners were asked about the different LL experiences to provide understanding about how they perceive themselves as learners (research question 1). Regarding informal learning, their comments on their previous experiences reflect the dichotomy between the importance of peer learning and a life full of bad decisions and suffering with the consequences. The finding about relationship issues and lack of communication may reflect the insecurity lived in prison, with impact on the self-system, which may be related to the need to 'appear strong'. This is not new in the literature related to the self-system and authors, such as Oser (2006) calls this disposition, defensive self-esteem. In other words, an inflated self-perception as a learner contributes to avoiding awareness of the low value attributed to oneself and supports attitudes and behaviours of superiority that could arise in relational conflicts between prisoners (Monteiro, Barros & Leite, 2015;). According to Basilio et al. (2017), less confidence in one's abilities is associated with greater egocentrism and a greater sense of inferiority. In the case of women, as mentioned above, Kamoyo (2018) observed low or moderate levels of self-esteem, and reports of uselessness, when learners in prison compare themselves to others.

The non-formal education findings reflect, on the one hand, the recognition of the importance of educational processes and, on the other hand, the difficulties faced by prisoners in the pre-incarceration situation (B. Brent & Orr, 2016; Hawley et al., 2013). As mentioned above, this situation is worsened by the prison conditions in which they find themselves and which can reinforce the barriers to LL (Brosens et al., 2019; Hopkins, 2015; Rangel, 2007).

Regarding to formal education, the predisposition to quit and the difficulty in understanding the content covered in the course may be related to experiences within the prison, such as routines, work, personal problems and legal issues that often overlap with the task of studying (Monteiro, Barros & Leite, 2015;). Restricted access to the internet is also a barrier that can cause some frustration and difficulties in understanding the online contents, which is in line with other studies (e.g. DiLoreto et al., 2017). In addition, several authors (Farley & Hopkins, 2017; Hopkins, 2015; Hopkins & Farley, 2014; Pike & Adams, 2012) underlie prison as a discouraging learning setting, with noisy spaces and a lack of recourses that facilitate autonomy and self-regulation within the learning process.

Concerning, furthermore, the first question, the SCAL results point towards the opportunity to participate in this e-learning training associating with the learners becoming more involved and responsible for their own learning and reinforces a positive self-perception as a learner, in all dimensions analysed (motivation, task orientation, problem-solving and class membership), which is in line with studies such as that of Farley et al. (2016) and Mertanen and Brunila (2018).

In relation to learners satisfaction with the e-learning modality (research question 2) and the added possibilities from access to digital technology, learners highlighted the value of interaction with peers and with tutors, and the practical use the e-learning training course contents may have, in the future. The learners also identified a positive impact on their self-concept and confidence to engage in LL. The fact that they expressed the wish to continue learning, is a good indicator of this positive learner disposition. This is in line with the Manifesto for Adult Education in the 21st century (European Association for the Education of Adults, 2019), in which the major concern is with the promotion of digital skills for an efficient active social participation, oriented to social cohesion, equality, equity, human rights and social justice.

It is worth highlighting the care and effort invested by the learners in the successful performance of the proposed tasks. It is also worth noting their personal responsibility in the processes of change. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning the situations experienced within the prison context and the association of studying with the opportunity to change learning strategies through the effort of understanding other points of view, which are fundamental processes for future social life, as sustained by Manger et al. (2019).

Conclusions

This study has enabled understanding of how these female learners in prison perceive and balance different expectations and contexts that support or hinder their learning. The learners' perceptions showed how they managed the balance between acknowledging the personal and professional utility of the e-learning training course, the valorisation of learning that occurs in non-formal contexts, and the difficulties experienced throughout the training, which are, sometimes, associated with previous negative experiences in school.

Regarding the research questions, there is a dichotomy between the self-concept developed as a result of the learning and the perceptions learners expressed during the e-learning training. Prior negative learning experiences, lack of skills that sustain online learning, relational issues related to prison adaptation, exercises of power, or survival mechanisms to cope with an adverse context contribute to this dichotomy. Internal benefits from online prison learning arise as well, including the sense of empowerment, the development of appropriate patterns of communication and attitudes, or the satisfaction from successfully completing online learning tasks.

The exploration of the self-system and, in particular, the self-concept of learning indicates the need for further analysis, since the existing instruments for self-assessment may not be suitable for studies in the prison context (B. Brent & Orr, 2016). On the other hand, given the small number of participants, the results cannot be generalised, although they may support reflection and debate. It is important to conduct longitudinal studies, allowing the establishment of relationships between e-learning training course experiences, mediated by digital technologies in prison, and any effects on the self-concept as a learner.

The main findings indicate that positive learning experiences in the context of educational activities undertaken during incarceration may contribute to the promotion of self-concept as a learner and overcome a previous, less positive perception. Further, online learning contributed to developing or reinforcing the learners in prisons effort to: improve attitudes and correct mistakes; understand others' points of view; improve self-regulation in time management; and successfully accomplish the proposed tasks.

If there is no doubt that the expansion of online distance learning brought adult education to a broader range of learners and women's participation was considerably improved, in the prison context the scenario is not so favourable. In fact, as it was mentioned by (UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2022b), since 2018 nothing changed concerning prisoners' participation in about 60% of the countries. That is why studies similar to this one have to be amplified and deeply explored.

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