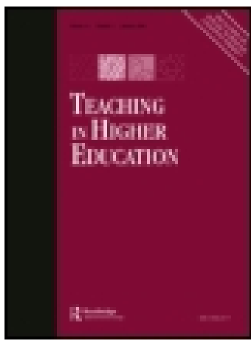

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Teaching in Higher Education
Critical Perspectives

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cthe20

‘Education changes a person’: exploring student development in a college-in-prison program through critical andragogy

Patrick Filipe Conway

To cite this article: Patrick Filipe Conway (2023): ‘Education changes a person’: exploring student development in a college-in-prison program through critical andragogy, Teaching in Higher Education, DOI: 10.1080/13562517.2023.2172568

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2023.2172568

Published online: 01 Feb 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=cthe20

TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2023.2172568

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Education changes a person’: exploring student development in a college-in-prison program through critical andragogy

Patrick Filipe Conway

Prison Education, Lynch School of Education & Human Development, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, USA

ABSTRACT
This phenomenological study investigates the educational experiences formerly incarcerated students identify as being important developmentally as part of their participation in a college-in-prison program. It does so by exploring the experiences of 21 formerly incarcerated students who participated in the Boston University Prison Education Program, the longest continuously-running college-in-prison program in the Northeast US. The study is contextualized within a critical andragogical framework, one which prioritizes developing agency and self-direction in learning, as well the capacity to critique ideological norms and develop deeper understandings of social contexts. Findings indicate program participation helped disrupt unhealthy personal and interpersonal dynamics within the prison environment. Participants developed confidence, pride, healthier self-conceptions, greater empathy, and a desire to positively impact others. This study’s implications can help inform instructors and program administrators in the development of effective curricula aimed at being responsive to the developmental needs and goals of students.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 August 2022
Accepted 19 January 2023

KEYWORDS
Prison education; andragogy; critical andragogy; student development; phenomenology

Introduction

As many colleges and universities seek ways to expand access to higher education opportunities in ways that both maintain academic rigor and uphold equitable practices (Liveley and Wardrop 2020), a frontier becoming increasingly relevant is within the domain of higher education in prison. This dynamic is not restricted to any one context or country, but is instead broadly occurring internationally (Reese 2019; Rangel Torrijo 2019). Perhaps no country has developed more in recent years within this space than the United States, where after multiple decades of either little or no access to such opportunities for incarcerated students, the enactment of recent federal legislation has now supported a rapid development of college-in-prison programs (US Department of Education 2021).

As these opportunities continue to emerge, it is important that educators and program administrators reflect on effective teaching strategies within such contexts. College-in-

CONTACT Patrick Filipe Conway conwaypd@bc.edu
© 2023 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

prison is often discussed in relation to its capacity to foster 'transformative' educational experiences. This is true within both US contexts (e.g. Keen and Woods 2016; Wyant and Lockwood 2018) and international contexts (e.g. Carberry 2017; Vazquez-Cano et al. 2019). Distinct from Mezirow's (1978) theory of transformative learning, these experiences in prison settings are less categorically defined. When invoked, they are commonly described by scholars as being either 'rehabilitative' (Behan 2014; Hall 2015) or 'liberatory' (O'Brien et al. 2022; Heppard 2019) in nature. Most often, they simply reflect experiences scholars *believe* are important developmentally for incarcerated students. However, little is empirically known about this issue from the perspective of students themselves.

Research into developmental experiences within such programs is particularly timely. Access for incarcerated students to Pell Grants (federal subsidies for students with financial need seeking to attain a bachelor's degree) has helped to reshape the landscape of college-in-prison within US contexts. After more than two decades without federal support following the 1994 Omnibus Crime Bill – which banned access to Pell Grants in prisons, ending the majority of programs – the 2016 Second Chance Pell Program has been influential in supporting the expansion of such opportunities in carceral settings. Initially, 63 colleges and universities were selected to participate in Second Chance Pell, but the initiative is now expanding to include up to 200 colleges and universities throughout the country (US Department of Education 2021). The program has been so successful that it has led to the full restoration of Pell Grant availability in prisons, taking effect in July 2023, with funding for it included in the COVID-19 Economic Relief Bill (Burke 2021).

College-in-prison programs have been found particularly beneficial in allowing incarcerated students to pursue instrumental aims (such as earning credentials toward building meaningful careers post-release), while simultaneously offering opportunities for mentorship and camaraderie, the cultivation of personal interests, and engagement with non-coercive reflective practices (Conway In press). Additionally, as Evans (2018) notes, programs often afford students the prospect of reclaiming a much-needed degree of agency over their own education and identities. As programs continue to take root and develop, however, many college faculty will be entering prison facilities as instructors for the first time, often with little prior experience working within such settings or with such student populations. It will be crucial for them to bear in mind the educational experiences incarcerated students value within their own personal development. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to investigate the types of experiences formerly incarcerated students identify as being important developmentally within college-in-prison program. It does so by exploring the experiences of 21 formerly incarcerated students who participated in the Boston University (BU) Prison Education Program, one of the longest continuously-running programs in the country.

Recent scholarship suggests the potential benefits critical approaches can have on students' meaning-making and critical thinking, as well as on their development of increased levels of nuance and comfort with ambiguity (Howes 2017; Machum and Clow 2015). Such approaches can have a democratizing effect. By exploring social structures, students are encouraged to construct identities with an eye toward strengthening the public good (Ross 2009). As such, this study explores student experiences by contextualizing them within a critical andragogical framework (Clemons 2019; Schapiro 2003),

one which prioritizes learners' personal histories and development toward self-direction, as well as their intersecting social identities in light of the well-documented repressive dynamics inside prisons both within the US and internationally (Farley and Hopkins 2017; Rodríguez 2010). Critical andragogy provides a useful lens for exploring student sensemaking because it aims to strike a balance between two important needs inside prison: the prioritization of self-direction and personal agency in learning (Evans 2018; Knowles et al. 2020); and the need for humanizing educational models that take into account the individual identities of students and the development of deeper understandings of social contexts (Clemons 2019; Conway 2022).

This study offers a student-centered approach to better understanding the specific types of educational experiences formerly incarcerated students find important developmentally. The research questions guiding this study are:

(1) What types of educational experiences do formerly incarcerated students identify as being developmentally beneficial as part of their participation in a college-in-prison program?
(2) How do formerly incarcerated students articulate connections between their personal learning and broader social issues through their experiences within higher education in prison?

Building on previous literatures, this study can help inform educators and program administrators of the types of educational experiences incarcerated students find developmentally impactful, as well as further explore how best to assist students in achieving these outcomes. Such insights can also begin to establish a developmental framework for better understanding incarcerated student experiences as part of college-in-prison programs.

Background: critical andragogy

This study is grounded within critical andragogy. Traditional forms of andragogy – a term used to describe the tenets associated with adult education – are premised on the assumption that in contrast to children, adult learners tend to conceive of themselves as being responsible for their own lives and decisions, and are thus motivated by maintaining a sense of personal agency within their own learning (Knowles et al. 2020). This stands in contrast to how incarcerated people are treated inside prisons, where the expectation is almost exclusively that they follow orders (Utheim 2016). Such loss of autonomy has potentially debilitating consequences. Scholarship suggests incarceration itself causes heightened stress, anxiety, and loneliness, among numerous other detrimental outcomes (DeHart et al. 2018).

The main critique of traditional andragogy is that it primarily focuses on individuals, and does not account for how social contexts might impact individual development (Conway 2022; Duff 2019). Andragogy is historically grounded within the experiences of highly-educated White males, potentially undercutting its relevance for more diverse learners (St. Clair and Käpplinger 2021). These critiques are especially important to consider, given how mass incarceration disproportionately impacts communities of color and the financially poor (Looney and Turner 2018; Simon 2014). A framework

that does not account for social contexts is limited in its application within a setting so greatly impacted by both macro- and micro- sociocultural dynamics (Castro 2018).

As an emerging field of study, critical andragogy aims to directly address these concerns. As Clemons (2019) notes, critical andragogy takes 'multicultural considerations into account so learners are humanized, thus mitigating the propensity of perpetuating hegemonic structures in the educational and … societal spheres' (p. 85). Critical andragogy values self-direction – which, as Brookfield (2005) notes, is frequently considered the 'distinguishing characteristic' of traditional andragogy (p. 83) – but also explicitly encourages the exploration of how individual identities, prior life experiences, systems of oppression, and shared social constructions intersect (Brown 2006; DeTurk 2011). Through both dialogue and reflection, critical andragogy prioritizes the development of critical consciousness, defined by Freire (2000) as 'learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (p. 35).

Traditional andragogy and critical pedagogies share certain commonalities, particularly in relation to the importance of learners being recognized and observed as individuals, rather than as mere 'products' or 'vessels' to which 'knowledge is [merely] added' (Clemons 2019). Within both approaches, instructors and students enter a dialogical learning process, one in which both actively participate (Freire 1993; Knowles et al. 2020). A major difference, however, boils down to emphasis: self-direction is paramount within traditional andragogy (Knowles et al. 2020), while the development of a deeper critical consciousness is often most prized within critical pedagogies (Freire 2000; McLaren 2003). It is precisely within its intention to balance between these two aims – the need for maintaining an important degree of personal agency within the learning process, and the development of deeper understandings of self in relation to social constructions at both small and large scales – that makes critical andragogy potentially useful in exploring the experiences formerly incarcerated students find important developmentally.

Methods

Context of the Boston University Program

Boston University has offered college credits to incarcerated students at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Norfolk (MCI-Norfolk), a men's prison 45-minutes southwest of Boston, since 1972. In 1991, the program also began offering credit-bearing coursework at MCI-Framingham, the only women's prison in the state (Boston University Prison Education Program, n.d.). Currently enrolled students pursue either a BA in Liberal Studies or an undergraduate certificate in Interdisciplinary Studies. Students released from prison prior to graduating can continue their education on campus. Over the program's history, a total of 353 students have graduated with a BA, and 28 of those have gone on to receive an MA (Boston University Prison Education Program, n.d.).

Recruitment and sample

The snowballed sample includes 21 formerly incarcerated students, each of whom participated in the Boston University Prison Education Program. This study was approved

by the Institutional Review Board at Boston College, reference number 21.117.01. Participation was voluntary, and informed written consent was obtained prior to commencing the study. Interviews were conducted between January–May 2021. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 72, with a median age of 43. Years of enrollment among participants ranged from 1974 to 2020. Thirteen participants had received their BA (12 of whom earned the degree while in prison, while one participant finished on campus).

The average self-reported GPA was 3.70, with a range of 3.00–4.00. The sample included 11 White participants, five Black participants, four Latino/a/x or Hispanic participants, and one who self-identified as multiracial Native American. These demographics broadly mirror those inside Massachusetts prisons (43% White, 27% Black, 26%, Latino/a/x or Hispanic, 1% Native American [Vera Institute of Justice 2019]). The sample included 11 men and 10 women. Appendix A provides a fuller demographic breakdown of participants.

Data sources and analysis

Data sources included hour-long, semi-structured interviews with each participant. All interviews were conducted via Zoom as a result of social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic (Coulson 2015). Questions were designed to elicit responses which provided reflective insight into the types of experiences participants deemed important in their own development as learners. Based on this study's critical andragogical framing, specific questions were designed to elicit responses regarding the potential importance of developing and/or sustaining personal agency in prison, as well as how program participation may have led to deeper understandings of social constructs and legacies of oppression.

Following a phenomenological approach, an open-ended, whole-part-whole analysis process was conducted that included three stages: a holistic reading of the data, detailed line-by-line readings of individual transcripts, and subsequent readings analyzing data within a critical andragogical framework across participants (Vagle 2018). This analytic process produced inductive codes, such as 'purpose and fulfillment,' 'reflecting on career pathways,' and 'dealing with challenges,' as well as deductive codes associated with critical andragogy, such as 'developing agency,' 'exploring societal contexts,' and 'understanding life experiences.'

Positionality

I approached this study from the perspective of an instructor, administrator, and advocate for college-in-prison. I have years of experience teaching within the BU Prison Education Program, as well as within the Boston College Prison Education Program, for which I recently assumed the role of program director. As a result of these experiences, I have my own beliefs in relation to the value of college-in-prison programs, as well as student-centered pedagogies. In addition to my career experiences, my education background and identity as a White, middle-class male also likely mediate my perspectives on the intersections between the criminal justice system and higher education. For this reason, Vagle's (2018) practice of *bridling* – a process of journaling designed to foreground my own thoughts and assumptions – was particularly important. Bridling is a

self-reflective and iterative process geared toward prioritizing the voices and perspectives of participants.

Findings

Participants in this study frequently cited the BU program's capacity for providing 'transformative' educational experiences. Many described their enrollment in the program as one of the most 'important,' 'productive,' and 'meaningful' developmental experiences in their lives. A critical andragogical lens provides a pathway to better understanding the types of dynamics that helped promote such positive regard. The three reported themes highlight components of participation described to be the most developmentally beneficial for participants.

Developing confidence, pride, and healthier self-conceptions

Participants described that one of the most prevailing aspects of the program was how it helped them develop self-confidence. Many described feeling great self-doubt prior to their enrollment, in large part due to the environment of the prison itself. Jeremy (all names pseudonyms), a Black man in his mid-30s now enrolled in graduate school outside of prison, commented on how incarceration led him and many of his peers toward feelings of self-stigmatization:

> The whole prison environment communicates the message that you're less significant, and even insignificant. The walls, the COs [correctional officers] watching you and telling you to hurry up or slow down. You're told when you can eat, when you can sleep, when to get up, when you can take a shower. And you're kind of like cattle. You're just watched over, and it's a whole punitive system, and they're ready to just hit you with a ticket or hit you with punishment. And, like, you're in this environment, you're gonna feel (he pauses) … it's going to cause you to feel less than.

Experiencing some form of dehumanizing treatment in prison was nearly universal among participants. As Adrián, a Hispanic man in his mid-30s, explained: 'In prison, you kind of learn this 'speak when spoken to' [mindset]. … you're disempowered.' Jeremy emphasized the harmful impact of such treatment: 'I never felt like I was like an idiot or unintelligent. It was more a lack of confidence, and when you're not confident, you tend to listen to outside voices.' He noted that these 'negative voices in prison' – whether coming from correctional officers or fellow incarcerated people – were easy to succumb to and hard to surmount. This dynamic was reiterated by almost every participant, as building or maintaining a positive self-conception was described as extremely challenging.

Experiences for participants within the BU program, however, stood in stark contrast to the prison environment. Participants felt treated and respected as individuals. Jeffrey – a White man in his mid-50s currently finishing his last remaining credits on campus – commented on the striking difference in interpersonal dynamics between his interactions within the program and outside of it. Jeffrey remarked that he had become accustomed while in prison to 'people fuck[ing] with you' all day. In contrast, within the BU program, he noted the dynamic was much different:

> Nobody was getting over [on you], nobody was … nobody gives a shit about why you're in prison. They care about you and, 'are you getting your education?' 'Do you need help?' 'Anything we can do for you?' And that gave me a sense of humanness. Like, you're not judging me, you're treating me as an equal, and I will never forget that.

The sense of being offered respect was important. For many, the 'dehumanizing' or 'degrading' treatment they received in prison was often an extension and exacerbation of treatment they had received prior to incarceration. Zachary, a White man in his early-30s, explained that growing up 'extremely poor' to 'drug-addicted parents' meant that he often felt 'looked down on.' He carried many of these feelings with him into prison, explaining that he never had 'a problem with authority,' but rather he had a 'hard time' with those who placed themselves above him: '[Authority] wasn't the issue. It's just people that think they're better than me.' Because he felt treated with respect by BU faculty, Zachary remarked that one of the biggest benefits he experienced was developing better self-esteem:

> When you're in prison, well, in my opinion, I have a low self-esteem because [I was] like socioeconomically at the lowest. You're considered a pariah. And the dehumanization process that goes along with being incarcerated, whether it be people coming in and out of your cell, raiding your cell, or the strip searches and stuff like that, I mean … I wasn't feeling myself in prison, if that makes sense. But now, I was working hard and gaining something out of [the program], and that made me feel better about myself.

Participants universally described gaining confidence in their own abilities and potential. Regina, a White woman in her mid-50s, commented on the impact the program had on herself and others: 'Education changes a person from the inside. They start to grow and learn, and they build confidence … They stand up taller, their shoulders go back a little, their head goes up higher every time they achieve something.' The sense of pride and accomplishment that participants developed enabled and encouraged processes of self-reflection and the exploration of life experiences within the context of society writ large.

With newfound and developing confidence in their own academic abilities, participants felt encouraged and supported by faculty to reflect on their own experiences while also considering larger societal contexts that may have impacted the course and direction of their lives. Pamela, a woman in her early-50s who self-identified as multiracial Native American, described how the cumulative effect of her enrollment within the program was that it inspired her to think critically about dynamics within her own life, and within the broader communities to which she belonged. She enjoyed asking self-reflective questions:

> What were the patterns in my family's life? Why did my father go to prison? Why was my mother an addict? Why was all this abandonment happening in our family? And how was this cycle gonna stop? Did I want my children to experience these same patterns?

Pamela remarked that she particularly prized not 'being told' the answers to these questions, but instead being offered guidance and support in becoming more self-directed in order to seek to draw her own conclusions.

What participants often found most developmentally impactful about their involvement within the program stood in direct relationship to negative and/or traumatic life experiences occurring prior to, or during their incarceration. The confidence gained in the development of critical thinking skills, and the knowledge garnered from being

able to better comprehend personal experiences within social and historical contexts, led to insights that helped participants gain a better understanding of themselves, often leading to more positive self-conceptions. For example, Dawn, a Black woman in her early-60s, expressed that when her mother died when Dawn was just 14, it created a seismic shift in her life: 'My grandmother raised me after my mother died. And she always told me I wasn't good enough … that I was never going to amount to anything.' Even though Dawn 'got straight A's in high school,' she battled feelings of inadequacy: 'I didn't think I had the intelligence.' She also struggled with her identity as a Black woman. Growing up in a 'mixed-race neighborhood,' she often felt demoralized by how she was treated. Her experiences being called 'extremely derogatory names' while riding the school bus contributed to her declining confidence: 'I went through a thing, I wished I was White, you know. White people had it all. I never wanted to be Black.'

Dawn positioned the importance of her involvement in the BU program as a way of integrating experiences inside the classroom into a better understanding of herself. She not only gained skills for improving prospects for employment post-release, and for 'becom[ing] more intelligent,' but she also, 'learned about things like race in this country, and White privilege that helped make heads-or-tails of [her own] background.' Dawn described that her experiences in the program helped her 'get rid of some of [her] self-sabotage.' A poetry class, in particular, stood out to Dawn as being meaningful, as she 'even wrote a letter appointed to [her] mother' that finally gave her a sense of 'closure after so many years.'

Developing empathy toward others

In addition to intrapersonal benefits such as building confidence and developing healthier self-conceptions, participation in the BU program led many participants to become more empathic toward others. This finding is in line with scholarship demonstrating that involvement in college-in-prison programs can often develop increased compassion among students, helping to bridge racial and cultural barriers that frequently divide prisons (Kallman 2018). The prison was described as an oppressive, stratified environment, in which participants viewed both correctional staff and other incarcerated people with 'suspicion' and 'distrust.' As Pamela remarked, 'It's like the haves, and the have-nots. [The prison] is not just separated by staff and prisoners, or race and class, it's also separated by crime. So, your crime is different than their crime … like you can't talk to them, you just don't talk.'

The BU program provided a pathway toward overcoming some of these barriers. A mutual respect between students developed. There was often a tacit recognition that involvement in the program created what Hugh – a White man in his early-50s – described as a type of 'brotherhood.' In providing an example of this dynamic, Hugh recalled an interaction he had early in the program with a fellow classmate who came 'from a very different background' than Hugh:

> I believe … he was a Latin King. And in there, I was 'out.' People knew, and I'm like this gay kid, drug dealer from Boston. And here we are on the softball field. And there was like a mutual respect. You know, traditionally being gay in prison, it's like, 'oh, fuck that.' But he respected me because he knew how much I loved the same thing he was doing. So, there was an unwritten or an unspoken kind of respect for one another.

The mutual respect that developed between students was due, in part, to pursuing the shared goal of a college degree, but it also related to the types of learning experiences taking place inside the classroom. As Darren – a Black man in his early-40s – commented, many of the courses offered within the program,

> [pushed] us to confront our biases, and [made] sure that we started going through life being able to self-reflect and to know that, okay, I have this bias I need to work on. I need to get more information so that I no longer am biased about something affecting others.

Many participants expressed that course material and class discussion often encouraged students to locate their own 'blind spots' and confront potential prejudices or 'untested assumptions.'

Participants felt that the classroom was a place where difficult discussions could be had. Students could voice their perspectives without fear of retribution or condemnation. This allowed for 'more honest discussions' and for multiple viewpoints to be listened to with the aim of 'seeking to understand,' rather than strictly to refute or 'criticize.' For many participants, this process not only helped them develop their own perspectives, but also to appreciate and empathize with the perspectives and backgrounds of others. As Dawn noted, one of her biggest lessons was in recognizing that respecting the experiences of others could help develop deeper interpersonal bonds:

> You know, we are products of what we're taught. Our parents weren't always right, but they did their best. And listening to these stories, we found out … the way we're brought up, or the company we keep, we're products of our environment. And then when you're old enough, you make your own decisions of whether you want to participate in certain behaviors. It brought our class closer together.

Participants expressed that the development of empathy, and the ability to better understand the perspectives of others, was integral to their own growth. When Ruth, a White woman in her mid-20s, was asked whether her involvement in the program changed her in any significant ways, she connected her response both to her newfound confidence, but also to her more thoughtful understanding of others:

> It definitely changed me. It gave me confidence I could take college classes, that I was intelligent. I *did* have the focus and discipline to be able to complete classes, and in the future, I could earn a degree. It helped me develop a better understanding of other people, too. I think it made me a more thoughtful and understanding person to the people around me.

As students developed more empathic relationships, they began developing a community in which they rooted for each other's successes. In contrast to many of the relationships inside prison, the BU program helped create a space where students aimed to lift each other up. As Darren depicted: 'It's almost like when you feel you're onto something [special], that, then, you got to let people know about it. And then you want to see them, and help them, to succeed.'

Desire to positively impact the lives of others

One of the most striking themes related directly to an outcome associated with the first two themes articulated in this paper. As students cultivated better understandings of themselves and greater empathy toward others, they simultaneously developed a desire

to positively impact the lives of others, both within the BU program and beyond it. For instance, Carolina, a Hispanic woman in her mid-30s, reflected on her perception that many students in the program wanted to 'pass on' the learning and knowledge they received as part of their education: 'We have that stigma attached to the whole 'felons' thing. We often think we're not enough. So [the BU program] kind of opened my mind a bit to like, there's just so much more that I could help out.' Similarly, Eugene – a Black man in his late-60s who graduated from the program with a BA in the 1980s – remarked that one of his biggest takeaways was that, 'You can't keep education to yourself; you have to give it away by doing anything possible to help people.'

The desire to help others with the skills and knowledge gained in the program often started within participants' own families. Many had siblings and cousins who participants felt it important to try to inspire toward developing academically and intellectually. In one particularly notable example, Eugene believed he was instrumental in encouraging his younger brother David to apply, attend, and eventually graduate from BU on its 'regular' campus. David even moved from Maryland to do so. Eugene described: 'He saw that I was changing. I was empowering myself and it was making a difference in my life.' His younger brother's graduation was a special point of pride for Eugene, as he took delight in the fact that his brother not only earned a degree from BU, but 'thrived on campus.' Eugene felt his brother's success, as well the academic success of other family members who were similarly encouraged by witnessing Eugene's 'excitement' and 'transformation,' was a major part of his legacy within the program.

Hernán, a Hispanic man in his early-40s, shared a similar experience with his family. He recalled speaking as valedictorian at his graduation ceremony. One point of emphasis during his speech was the impact he believed his involvement in the program had on his family:

> I spoke about my life, and how education and the teachers and professors helped me change. How I was the first one in my family to get a degree, and how I was so motivated to see my family [do the same]. My sister went and got her degree, and my brother went and got a degree. I was the first one, and they were able to follow me.

Hernán expressed that his desire to positively impact others extended well beyond his own family. After graduating from BU and then being released from prison, Hernán began a career that eventually led to him work as 'a youth social worker … working with individuals from the street life, individuals coming home from prison, being a mentor.' Hernán believes that part of what makes him effective in his job is his ability to relate to others. This ability often reveals itself in relatively 'ordinary,' but important ways, as he described working with clients who are,

> always saying the same thing, 'I wish I told this person this type of thing, but I don't know how to express it; I can't find the right words.' And I'm like, 'I can relate to you. I remember when I was in a situation where I couldn't find the right words either.'

For Hernán, it became important to assist others in gaining the tools necessary to express themselves better, articulate their thoughts and emotions, and communicate in healthier ways. Now directing a non-profit that works with 'troubled youth,' Hernán views his job as an extension of his involvement in the BU program, aiming to continue 'pass[ing] on' the types of opportunities for personal growth that he himself benefitted from.

A number of participants found their experiences so meaningful that it became important for them to 'give back' to the program itself. Jeffrey ascribed this tendency to the welcoming interpersonal dynamics the program fostered: 'There's really not a jealousy factor. I thought there would be. It's like, everybody acknowledges the goodness of this – how powerful it can be.' Similarly, Regina emphasized how 'transformative' the BU program was for her. In part, what made her experiences so impactful was the recognition that she could help others have similarly meaningful experiences. She helped serve as a clerk for the program, taking her responsibilities seriously to assist in recruiting potential candidates for enrollment, ensuring better communication between the program and students, and helping faculty with administrative needs.

When asked why she became so invested in the program, Regina referenced the impact her involvement had at a personal level: 'When you're in education, that's when you can focus on you. Because that's when you start to learn about who you are, and what possibilities there are, and things that you had never been [exposed] to before.' Regina found helping others in prison so rewarding that she started a separate program (with help from BU administrators and faculty) aimed at facilitating an improved reentry process for those who were set to be released. The fact that she accomplished this while still incarcerated speaks to her entrepreneurial spirit, something she has continued to put to use post-release, as she now has taken on a leadership position within a nationally-recognized tutoring and academic support services program for both incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students.

The number of this study's participants actively involved – either through volunteering or within their own careers – in work that 'gives back' to incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, or other marginalized groups was astounding. The sample included those currently working as nurses, social workers, drug addiction counselors, church leaders, mentors for 'at-risk youth,' leaders within tutoring and academic services, reentry specialists, and domestic abuse counselors. After being asked about the types of careers former BU students often pursue, Hugh found it unsurprising that so many of the study's participants went on to find work with a public service orientation. He described how being involved in the program served as such a 'lifeline' for students that it naturally encouraged many to consider how they could translate the opportunities they received into similarly benefitting others.

Hugh, who now works as a social worker after earning his Master's in Social Work (MSW), described how he recently returned to prison to visit with students currently enrolled in the BU program. He became emotional when reflecting on why the program was so personally meaningful, and why he felt the need to return to meet with students: 'It was an awakening of potential, … of belonging in this community of higher education, and the acknowledgement that *I*, in fact, belonged there.' Like Hugh, imparting this sense of empowerment and belonging to others was something that became integral to the lives and careers of many of this study's participants.

Discussion

With the expansion of Second Chance Pell and the announcement of the full return of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students, higher education opportunities in US prisons are set to become more accessible than at any time in recent history. This is

an important sign of progress, particularly as college degree attainment has become both more common, and also more frequently required by employers (Schaeffer 2022). The need for access to a college-level education is vital, a reality that holds especially true for incarcerated people, who often already face significant challenges post-release in developing careers and securing housing (Couloute and Kopf 2018; Remster 2019). Beyond such instrumental aims, college-in-prison programs represent a unique – and often, 'liberatory' – opportunity for students, frequently disrupting the many harmful personal and interpersonal dynamics inside prisons (Conway In press; Evans 2018).

And, yet, with so many instructors likely to begin teaching inside prison facilities for the first time, it is vital that they engage with students in a way that responds to the types of experiences incarcerated students find developmentally beneficial. The present study contributes to this end, employing a critical andragogical lens to help identify the types of experiences formerly incarcerated students found most impactful, and often even transformative. These insights can help guide educators and program administrators in the development of teaching strategies and curricula inside college-in-prison programs.

The data gathered represent a particular time, program, and institutional culture, and so implications of this study should be drawn carefully, especially considering the wide array of program types college-in-prison now comprises. The themes emerging from the current data, however, are nonetheless important for program administrators and prison education faculty in considering the types of educational experiences they aim to cultivate. Findings contribute to research on how involvement in college-in-prison programs can catalyze personal and interpersonal development among participants (Behan 2014; Keen and Woods 2016). Data analysis uncovered three potential personal and/or interpersonal outcomes for students enrolled in college-in-prison programming that stood in direct contrast to the environment of the prison itself. These outcomes were directly linked to experiences participants had within the BU program. Figure 1 provides a visual presentation of this study's findings.

As Figure 1 depicts, the BU program is situated within a nuanced and complicated political space, in that the program exists *within* the confines of the prison environment, but also encourages experiences that are *disruptive of* that very same environment. For example, many participants described that some of their most developmentally impactful experiences related to developing a renewed sense of confidence. In line with scholarship on prison contexts, the environment of the prison was routinely described as engendering fear and self-doubt (Dehart et al. 2018). Participants felt the treatment they received from faculty in the BU program helped combat this harmful paradigm, offering a path toward greater self-esteem and self-worth. The fostering of mutual respect (both between peers and between students and faculty) allowed for a supportive environment in which students felt liberated to reflect on their own experiences and lives within the context of broader societal structures.

A paradoxical tension often exists within college-in-prison programs, in that such programs often maintain aspirations of providing 'emancipatory' education, while simultaneously inhabiting a highly restrictive and punitive environment (Castro and Brawn 2017). These dynamics highlight the need for instructors to recognize the individuality of students, to respond to their diverse needs and learning styles, and to create opportunities for peer-based and peer-led curricula (Devilly et al. 2005). Peer-educational

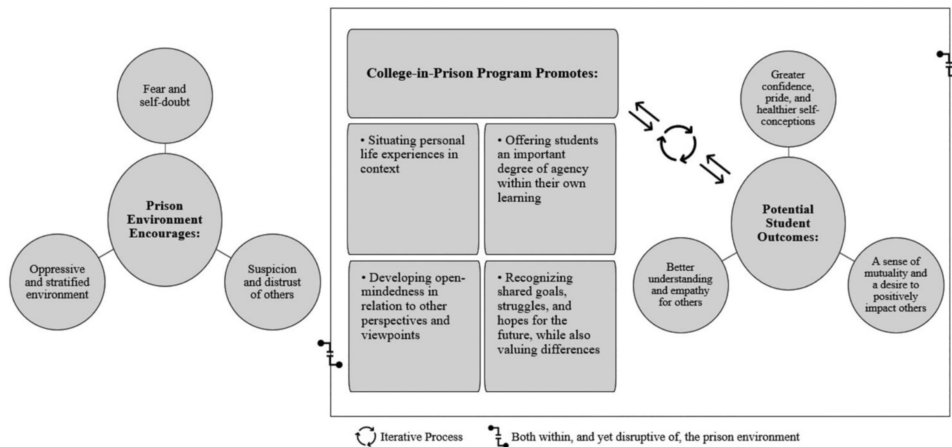

Figure 1. Visual presentation of findings.

activities – including small group work, classroom discussions, and peer-directed exercises – allow for students to share and take in knowledge from each other. The risk of not encouraging these types of educational practices may increase the likelihood of students experiencing stigmatization (Evans et al. 2018), as programs can become perceived as an additional form of social control (Pryor and Thompkins 2013).

With the confidence gained in the development of critical thinking skills, participants identified that maintaining a measure of agency within their own reflective practices was very important, a finding that is unsurprising given the importance of fostering self-direction among adult learners (Knowles et al. 2020). Rather than merely following additional dictates, the guidance and support offered by faculty to help students formulate their own conclusions encouraged the integration of experiences inside the classroom into healthier self-conceptions and better understandings of lived experiences. Such a finding emphasizes the need for curricula and teaching practices that are not prescriptive in nature, but instead value student input and insight. Assignments and activities that draw on students' life experiences can be particularly useful within such settings, as learners' prior experiences can often form one of the richest reservoirs for adult learning (Clemons 2019).

The BU program provided a space that helped combat a stratified, oppressive atmosphere of distrust and suspicion. Bonds developed between students in the classroom that frequently overcame barriers of race, class, culture, and geographic background (Kallman 2018). The courses offered encouraged students to confront their own potential biases, which enabled participants to begin viewing their peers with more compassion and empathy. The classroom environment was one which fostered open discussions, where viewpoints could be articulated, deliberated, and debated without fear of reprisal. This study's findings suggest that teaching practices that both challenge and develop students' critical thinking (Howes 2017; Machum and Clow 2015) are particularly useful in prison settings, helping students gain comfort dealing with nuance and complexity, and assisting them in developing greater open-mindedness regarding the perspectives and opinions of others. Such dynamics often instilled within students a desire to support and encourage each other's success, as a sense of mutuality developed in recognizing

shared goals, struggles, and hopes for the future. At a program-level, emphasis should be placed on creating networks and communities of support for students post-release to best capitalize on the dynamics created within such programs, and to better ensure that they continue for students after incarceration.

As participants developed deeper understandings of themselves, their peers, and society writ large, they also frequently developed a desire to positively impact others. Many participants described such experiences as personally transformational, contributing to existing understandings of what comprises such types of experiences in college-in-prison programs (Carberry 2017; Wyant and Lockwood 2018). This pattern often occurred within the context of participants' connection to their own families, as they sought to pass on educational opportunities and insights to their siblings, children, and/or extended family. Many participants also actively pursued careers where they could make use of their own experiences and knowledge for the benefit of others. Guided by this study's critical andragogical framework, it is evident that program curricula helping to contextualize students' life histories (Ross 2009), while also offering an important degree of personal agency (Knowles et al. 2020), enabled students to turn the often-traumatic experience of incarceration into something much more positive, not only for themselves but others as well. This became one of the most generative aspects of their involvement in the BU program, helping participants share and pass on the benefits of college-in-prison.

Conclusion

In considering the environment in which such programs take place, Jeremy's comment is particularly noteworthy: 'The whole prison environment communicates the message that you're less significant, and even insignificant.' The BU program helped provide an entirely different dynamic, helping to combat the type of dehumanizing treatment and messaging communicated by the prison itself. With access to Pell Grants set to be fully restored in US prisons in 2023, new and already established programs are likely to continue to emerge and develop. Many educators throughout the United States will be entering into prisons as administrators and/or instructors for the first time. It is critically important that they reflect on the types of educational experiences students within such programs find most developmentally impactful.

College-in-prison programs can help facilitate for students a greater sense of confidence and pride, as well as healthier self-conceptions. Maintaining a sense of individual agency, while also gaining the critical skills needed to better place life experiences into context, can assist students in developing greater empathy, and inspire a desire to positively impact the lives of others. Such insights are not only important for instructors in considering the specific aims and objectives of individual coursework, but also for program administrators in planning and designing effective curricula capable of responding to the types of experiences incarcerated students are most likely to welcome and value.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Patrick Filipe Conway http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9460-1960

References

Behan, C. 2014. Learning to Escape: Prison Education, Rehabilitation and the Potential for Transformation. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry* 1, no. 1: 20–31. doi:10.15845/jper.v1i1.594.

Boston University Prison Education Program. n.d. "About the Prison Education Program." https://sites.bu.edu/pep/about/.

Brookfield, S. 2005. *The Power of Critical Theory for Adult Learning and Teaching*. New York, NY: Open University Press.

Brown, K. 2006. Leadership for Social Justice and Equity: Evaluating a Transformative Framework and Andragogy. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 42, no. 5: 700–745. doi:10.1177/0013161X06290650.

Burke, L. 2021. "After the Pell Ban." Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/01/27/pell-grants-restored-people-prison-eyes-turn-assuring-quality.

Carberry, D. 2017. Masculinities, Attachment Theory and Transformative Learning: A Discussion of Some Theoretical Considerations for Developing an Emotionally Secure Teaching Praxis. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry* 4, no. 2: 82–97. doi:10.15845/jper.v4i2.883.

Castro, E. 2018. Racism, the Language of Reduced Recidivism, and Higher Education in Prison: Toward an Anti-Racist Praxis. *Critical Education* 9, no. 17: 1–14. doi:10.14288/ce.v9i17.186357.

Castro, E., and M. Brawn. 2017. Critiquing Critical Pedagogies Inside the Prison Classroom: A Dialogue Between Student and Teacher. *Harvard Educational Review* 87, no. 1: 99–121. doi:10.17763/1943-5045-87.1.99.

Clemons, A. 2019. Manifesto for Critical Andragogy: A Liberating Critique to Adult Learning. In *Multicultural Andragogy for Transformative Learning*, eds. David Peltz, and Anthony Clemons, 73–90. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

Conway, P.F. 2022. Andragogy in Prison: Higher Education in Prison and the Tenets of Adult Education. *Adult Education Quarterly* 72, no. 4: 361–379. doi:10.1177/07417136221100481.

Conway, P. F.. In press. Beyond Recidivism: Exploring Formerly Incarcerated Student Perspectives on the Value of Higher Education in Prison. *The Review of Higher Education.*

Couloute, L., and D. Kopf. 2018. "Out of Prison and Out of Work: Unemployment Among Formerly Incarcerated People." Prison Policy Initiative. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html.

Coulson, N. 2015. *Online Research Methods for Psychologists*. New York, NY: Palgrave.

Craft, T., N. Gonzalez, K. Kelleher, M. Rose, and O. Takor. 2019, June 4. *A Second Chance: College-in-Prison Programs in New York State*. Albany, NY: Rockefeller Institute of Government. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED605777.pdf.

DeHart, D., C. Shapiro, and S. Clone. 2018. "The Pill Line Is Longer Than the Chow Line": The Impact of Incarceration on Prisoners and Their Families. *The Prison Journal* 98, no. 2: 188–212. doi:10.1177/0032885517753159.

DeTurk, S. 2011. Critical Andragogy and Communication Activism: Approaches, Tensions, and Lessons Learned from a Senior Capstone Course. *Communication Teacher* 25, no. 1: 48–60. doi:10.1080/17404622.2010.513995.

Devilly, G., L. Sorbello, L. Eccleston, and T. Ward. 2005. Prison-Based Peer-Education Schemes. *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 10, no. 2: 219–240. doi:10.1016/j.avb.2003.12.001.

Duff Jr., M. 2019. Perspectives in AE—Adult Black Males and Andragogy: Is There a Goodness of Fit? *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development* 31, no. 4: 51–58. doi:10.1002/nha3.20264.

Evans, D. 2018. The Elevating Connection of Higher Education in Prison: An Incarcerated Student's Perspective. *Critical Education* 9, no. 11: 1–14. doi:10.14288/ce.v9i11.186318.

Evans, D., E. Pelletier, and J. Szkola. 2018. Education in Prison and the Self-Stigma: Empowerment Continuum. *Crime & Delinquency* 64, no. 2: 255–280. doi:10.1177/0011128717714973.

Farley, H., and S. Hopkins. 2017. The Prison is Another Country: Incarcerated Students and (Im)Mobility in Australian Prisons. *Critical Studies in Education* 58, no. 2: 150–167. doi:10.1080/17508487.2016.1255240.

Freire, P. 1993. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed (M. Bergman Ramos, Trans.)*. New York, NY: Continuum.

Freire, P. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed (M. Bergman Ramos, Trans.)*. New York, NY: Continuum.

Hall, L. 2015. Correctional Education and Recidivism: Toward a Tool for Reduction. *Journal of Correctional Education* 66, no. 2: 4–29.

Heppard, B. 2019. The Art of Liberating Humanity. *Critical Education* 10, no. 3: 1–10. doi:10.14288/ce.v10i3.

Howes, L. 2017. Critical Thinking in Criminology: Critical Reflections on Learning and Teaching. *Teaching in Higher Education* 22, no. 8: 891–907. doi:10.1080/13562517.2017.1319810.

Kallman, M. 2018. Teaching Sociology in a Men's Prison: How Total Institutions Shape Pedagogy and Engagement with Content. *Teaching Sociology* 46, no. 4: 295–308. doi:10.1177/0092055X18775176.

Keen, C., and R. Woods. 2016. Creating Activating Events for Transformative Learning in a Prison Classroom. *Journal of Transformative Education* 14, no. 1: 15–33. doi:10.1177/1541344615602342.

Knowles, M., E. Holton, R. Swanson, and P. Robinson. 2020. *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*,9th ed). New York, NY: Routledge.

Liveley, G., and A. Wardrop. 2020. Challenging Chronocentrism: New Approaches to Futures Thinking in the Policy and Praxis of Widening Participation in Higher Education. *Teaching in Higher Education* 25, no. 6: 683–697. doi:10.1080/13562517.2020.1733957.

Looney, A., and N. Turner. 2018. "Work and Opportunity Before and After Incarceration." Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/research/work-and-opportunity-before-and-after-incarceration/.

Machum, S., and M. Clow. 2015. Commit Sociology. *Humanity & Society* 39, no. 2: 189–212. doi:10.1177/0160597615574551.

McLaren, P. 2003. Critical Pedagogy: A Look at the Major Concepts. In *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, eds. Antonia Darder, Marta Baltodano, and Rodolfo Torres, 69–103. New York, NY: Routledge.

Mezirow, J. 1978. Perspective Transformation. *Adult Education* 28, no. 2: 100–110. doi:10.1177/074171367802800202.

O'Brien, K., H. King, J. Phillips, K. Dalton, and Phoenix 2022. "Education as the Practice of Freedom?" – Prison Education and the Pandemic. *Educational Review* 74, no. 3: 685–703. doi:10.1080/00131911.2021.1996335.

Pryor, M., and D. Thompkins. 2013. The Disconnect Between Education and Social Opportunity for the Formerly Incarcerated. *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 38, no. 3: 457–479. doi:10.1007/s12103-012-9184-0.

Rangel Torrijo, H. 2019. Cooperation and Education in Prison: A Policy Against the Tide in the Latin American Penitentiary Crisis. *International Review of Education* 65, no. 5: 785–809. doi:10.1007/s11159-018-9747-5.

Reese, R. 2019. The Prison Education Project. *International Review of Education* 65, no. 5: 687–709. doi:10.1007/s11159-017-9695-5.

Remster, B. 2019. A Life Course Analysis of Homeless Shelter Use Among the Formerly Incarcerated. *Justice Quarterly* 36, no. 3: 437–465. doi:10.1080/07418825.2017.1401653.

Rodríguez, D. 2010. The Disorientation of the Teaching Act: Abolition as Pedagogical Position. *Radical Teacher* 88, no. 1: 7–19. doi:10.1353/rdt.2010.0006.

Ross, S. 2009. Critical Race Theory, Democratization, and the Public Good: Deploying Postmodern Understandings of Racial Identity in the Social Justice Classroom to Contest

Academic Capitalism. *Teaching in Higher Education* 14, no. 5: 517–528. doi:10.1080/13562510903186709.
Schaeffer, K. 2022. “10 Facts About Today’s College Graduates.” Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/04/12/10-facts-about-todays-college-graduates/.
Schapiro, S. 2003. From Andragogy to Collaborative Critical Pedagogy: Learning for Academic. Personal, and Social Empowerment in a Distance-Learning Ph.D. Program.” *Journal of Transformative Education* 1, no. 2: 150–166. doi:10.1177/1541344603001002008.
Simon, J. 2014. Uncommon Law: America’s Excessive Criminal Law & Our Common-Law Origins. *Daedalus* 143, no. 3: 62–72. doi:10.1162/DAED_a_00288.
St. Clair, R., and B. Käpplinger. 2021. Alley or Autobahn? Assessing 50 Years of the Andragogical Project. *Adult Education Quarterly* 71, no. 3: 272–289. doi:10.1177/07417136211027879.
US Department of Education. 2021, July 30. U.S. Department of Education announces it will expand the Second Chance Pell experiment for the 2022-2023 award year. https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-announces-it-will-expand-second-chance-pell-experiment-2022-2023-award-year.
Utheim, R. 2016. The Case for Higher Education in Prison: Working Notes on Pedagogy, Purpose, and Preserving Democracy. *Social Justice* 43, no. 3: 91–106.
Vagle, M. 2018. *Crafting Phenomenological Research*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Routledge.
Vazquez-Cano, E., A.I. Holgueras-González, and J. Fombona-Cadavieco. 2019. Studying for a University Degree in Penitentiary Centers in Spain: Challenges and Difficulties from the Internee’s Perspective. *The Prison Journal* 99, no. 5: 593–613. doi:10.1177/0032885519875074.
Vera Institute of Justice. 2019. “Incarceration Trends in Massachusetts: Incarceration in Local Jails and State Prisons.” https://www.vera.org/publications/state-incarceration-trends/massachusetts.
Wyant, B., and B. Lockwood. 2018. Transformative Learning, Higher Order Thinking, and the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. *Journal of Correctional Education* 69, no. 3: 49–67.

Appendix

A: Demographic characteristics of study participants.

Study Participants Sample Characteristics	n	%	Median	Range
Gender				
Men	11	52		
Women	10	47		
Race				
Black	5	24		
Latino/a/x or Hispanic	4	19		
*Multiracial Native American	1	5		
White	11	52		
Education				
Graduated with MA	1	5		
Graduated with BA	13	62		
Not Yet Completed BA	7	33		
Current Age			43	26–72
GPA			3.70	3.00-4.00
Initial Enrollment			2006	1974–2019
Last Class/Graduation			2011	1986–2020

Note. $N = 21$.
**Self-Identified.*