Article

Journal of Transformative Education
2022, Vol. 20(4) 379–395

DOI: 10.1177/15413446211051092
journals.sagepub.com/home/jtd
SAGE

"Moving the Rubble": Reflection, Conscientization, and Transformative Learning With Men Incarcerated for Organized Crime in Mexico

Rebecca Danielle Strickland[1]

Abstract

While many scholars have examined transformative learning in different prison education programs, the field has only recently reached Latin America. This article presents a participatory action research project which has been operating in a prison for men accused of organized crime in Jalisco, Mexico, since 2018. The analysis is based on testimonies related to personal and collective transformation in a context of multifaceted oppression. It also explores the blurry lines between reflection, conscientization, and transformation, inviting us to consider how transformative education relates to social stigma and freedom.

Keywords

transformative learning, conscientization, emancipation, prison, cartels

The Puente Grande state penitentiary complex outside the Guadalajara metropolitan area in the western state of Jalisco, Mexico, incarcerates approximately 11,300 men, distributed between three prisons, along with some 500 women in a separate center

[1]Department of Psychology, Education and Health, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO), Tlaquepaque, Mexico

Corresponding Author:
Rebecca Danielle Strickland, Department of Psychology, Education and Health, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO), Periférico Sur Manuel Gómez Morín #8585, Tlaquepaque 45090, Mexico.
Email: danielle@iteso.mx

(DIGPRES, 2020). Although the *Reclusorio Metropolitano* was designed to hold 1608 men, since its inauguration in 2013, the population has barely reached 600. Meanwhile, the other two male prisons on the premises—the *Comisaría de Prisión Preventiva* (with a capacity to house 2992 men) and the *Comisaría de Sentenciados* (designed for 2118 men)—are both vastly overpopulated, as is the case for a third of state prisons in Mexico (CNDH, 2019).

It is in this unusual institution, commonly referred to as "el Metro," where the transformative learning project to which this paper is dedicated has been developed. *Rompemuros* (wall-breaker) is a participatory action research (PAR) project initiated in January 2018, focused on the biannual publication of a literary magazine, mostly comprised of autobiographical narratives. One benefit of the project is that the publications serve as primary resources to analyze issues of organized crime, violence, and punitive punishment in Mexico and beyond. As Whitfield (2018) explains, "prison writing seems to offer an epistemically privileged account of both the power of the state and other forces" (p. 2). However, here we will explore how the texts also reflect changes in the writers' worldviews, values, personal identities, and sense of freedom, by considering the transformative learning process attributed to this project.

Since publications regarding Mexican prisons in English are limited, I begin with an overview of the national penitentiary system, the Puente Grande complex and specifically the center where this project is based. *Rompemuros* is part of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, founded by Lori Pompa through Temple University in 1997. Thus, before detailing the methodology of the project, I also include a brief presentation of the pedagogical model of Inside-Out and the program's history in Mexico.

In the spirit of collective, horizontal creation upon which *Rompemuros* is based, the second half of the paper is dedicated to the men's testimonies regarding how their participation in Inside-Out has affected them. Here, we consider Freire's theory of conscientization as a gateway to Mezirow's theory of transformative learning and contemplate the subjective value of transformative education in an institution designed to deprive people of freedom, specifically in a country dominated by organized crime.

Prisons in Mexico

The 2018 National Census of Government, Public Safety and State Penitentiaries reported 309 state detention centers in Mexico (255 for adults and 54 for juveniles), with a population of 176,819 incarcerated adults and 1587 adolescents (INEGI, 2019).[1] Article 18 of the Mexican Constitution recognizes the penitentiary system as the public institution in charge of "reinserting" prisoners into society to prevent recidivism. However, Mexican prisons, like most in the world, are more commonly thought of as schools of crime than reform institutes. In Jalisco, for example, 55% of those admitted to prisons in 2016 for robbery were cases of recidivism (INEGI, 2017). Considering that in 2020 an estimated 99.3% of the crimes committed in the country went unpunished (UDLAP, 2020), the "reform" rate is likely even lower.

Keeping "petty-thieves" out of prison is not necessarily a bad thing, considering that the Mexican penitentiary system is also known for the recruitment of cartel members. Since one's survival behind bars may depend on affiliation with the governing organized crime group, those incarcerated for misdemeanors may leave prison after a short stay indebted to the cartel and join their ranks on the outside.

At least one out of every three state penitentiaries in Mexico is controlled by a cartel through self-management (*autogobierno*) (CNDH, 2019), meaning that a group of incarcerated cartel members exercises autonomy and authority over the prison's administration. Cartels profit from various businesses operating inside prisons including food, beverage and drug sales, television, phone, fan and private cell rentals, loan services, pawn shops, and prostitution rings. Additional profits come from the production and sales of leather, silver and other artisan products, as well as the operation of phone extorsion rings and other illicit activities in cooperation with external cartel members.

Puente Grande and the Reclusorio Metropolitano

The Puente Grande complex, located approximately 30 min southeast of the Guadalajara metro area (population 5.3 million), is renowned for Juaquin "el Chapo" Guzmán's 2001 escape. El Chapo fled from the federal prison[2] adjacent to the state complex containing the four facilities mentioned above: "el Preventivo" (for men awaiting sentencing), "CRS" (for men who have been sentenced), "el Femenil" (for women) and "el Metro" (for men accused of high-impact organized crime).

With an initial investment of 131 million dollars, el Metro began operating in 2013. Authorities justified the expense to help decongest other state prisons that were overpopulated by 167% and to separate cartel members from the rest of the prison population (El Informador, 2013). By 2020, el Metro had still not reached full capacity, yet el Preventivo continued to be overpopulated by 148% (DIGPRES, 2020).

The new center is equipped with the most modern prison technology in the country, including more than 900 automated doors with intercoms, 500 video cameras, x-ray machines, and a system to detect electronic devices within 160 feet of the prison (El Informador, 2013). According to José Antonio Pérez, Director of Prevention and Social Reintegration in Jalisco, el Metro holds members from at least 14 different cartels accused of homicide, kidnapping, and arms trafficking, among other crimes. While those incarcerated in the other prisons of Puente Grande wear white or beige clothing, in el Metro prisoners are required to wear orange. It is also the only facility in Jalisco to have been accredited by the American Correctional Association (ACA). It was as part of the initial effort to obtain this accreditation in 2017 that I was invited to teach an Inside-Out course there.

Inside-Out in Mexico

By implementing college courses in prisons with combined groups of incarcerated and campus-based university students, the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program seeks to

facilitate dialogue and learning across profound social differences. Inside-Out currently operates in approximately 150 universities and prisons throughout the United States and in six other countries. More than 1100 college professors have participated in the program's trainings and over 60,000 students have taken an Inside-Out class (Inside-Out, 2021). In most cases, a certified Inside-Out professor offers a course to an equal number of college students and incarcerated students to make up the combined group. "Inside" students are not usually registered at the university, nor do they pay for the course, unless they receive the same formal accreditation as the "outside" students.

The Jalisco State Penitentiary System is the first in Latin America to offer Inside-Out. In 2015, after becoming certified in Philadelphia, I started the program with a group of undergraduate students from the National Pedagogical University and women incarcerated in el Femenil. When prison authorities invited me to implement the program in el Metro, I was hesitant to give up the sense of sorority generated through Inside-Out at el Femenil, but also intrigued by the idea of working with cartel members and dabbling in what I imagined to be "messy masculinities."

Aside from initial resistance by several inside participants to explore their emotions, the program was an immediate success. So much so, that at the end of the second semester, a group of students developed a proposal to continue working together to create a literary magazine.

Around the same time, we received a grant to expand the program in Mexico. In January 2018, I returned to Philadelphia where I was certified to facilitate Inside-Out trainings for professors. The following month, we began the *Rompemuros* seminar in el Metro with a three-tier agenda. The main intention was to enable students from previous Inside-Out classes to continue learning together. A second purpose was to publish autobiographical narratives and other reflective writing from the group with the production of the literary journal, also entitled *Rompemuros*. Third, the inside participants would be trained to co-facilitate the first Inside-Out certification course offered in Spanish, along with Lori Pompa and myself.[3]

As of 2021, Inside-Out has been taught at three prisons in the Puente Grande complex, as well as in the state juvenile detention facility and with a group of men on parole. Over 150 college students from seven universities and 100 incarcerated men, women and youth have participated in the classes.

Rompemuros

In sharing autobiographical narratives and other reflective writing by men incarcerated in el Metro, this project seeks to contribute to the social integration of people with criminal records. After multiple debates in class on stigma and the prison system, we now generally use the term "(re)integration," instead of "reinsertion," considering that it comprehends the idea of social inclusion as a two-way street. Several inside participants find the well-meaning vision that stereotypes incarcerated people as "excluded victims" in a neoliberal society to be short-sighted, noting conscious decisions to join the cartel. In the words of one student incarcerated in el Metro, Solorio,

> Prejudice is something deeply rooted in society, it has to do with double standards, judging others as if one could not make the same mistake […] true reintegration [is hindered] because of the *autogobierno* and the lack of resources and infrastructure, but even more so because of the lack of desire on both sides. However, it is possible, even with all these shortcomings. There are people who want to help us and prisoners who want to change.[4]

Nonetheless, marked social class divisions in Mexico, constantly reinforced by stigma, remain a significant part of the problem. The requirement of a criminal record report from the police department for most employment and college admission applications is a clear example of the discriminatory social norms faced by people who have been incarcerated.

Goffman (1963) explains that stigmatized individuals act according to societal expectations of the label they carry. Thus, when one is labeled as a "narco" or "hitman," for example, it is more likely for him to assume this identity and reject socially inclusive opportunities within the legal sectors of society. As we will see below, through transformative learning, *Rompemuros* tends to strengthen other aspects of one's identity, consequently debilitating the stigma. Critical dialogue, writing, and other reflective activities have stimulated changes in participants' perception-making processes and how they respond to prejudices. The development of academic abilities has also transformed several of these men's life projects and generated a sense of emancipation in them, despite being incarcerated. In other words, a "transformation" in the way they perceive themselves and others has reduced their appropriation of stigmatic labels.

We often refer to this process as the development of critical consciousness, which has been found to be, in itself, "liberating" (Freire, 1970). As Eric wrote, "Participating in Inside-Out has been one of the best educational experiences in my life. For me, it represents a great movement of conscience, to see crime from a different perspective, its effects and consequences." Through class discussions and writing, the men gain a deeper understanding of personal and societal problems and often recognize new opportunities for praxis. They are thus more critically aware of the stigma they face and many have refined their abilities to confront it. This process is stimulated by the use of a *sentipensante* (emotionally thoughtful) pedagogy in the seminar and the development of critical thinking skills that contribute to a collective transformation, uniquely experienced by each member of the group. As Fernando explains,

> Since the Inside-Out program began in el Metro, countless students and graduates have passed through its classrooms [...] people from political life and comrades from the world of literature who, with their chronicles and narratives, have enriched our writing [...] And with them, our words and thoughts have crossed the walls, they have been liberated; those women, men and young people have taken them away. They have been published in the *Rompemuros* journal and on its website. Our feelings have already crossed borders […] The success of this project is based on the encounters that have been facilitated, in person and through publications, where our ideas and words are heard by others.

In this quote, there is a notable sense of emancipation in relation to the project, referring to the "liberation" of one's ideas. Furthermore, Fernando's reference to professional authors as "comrades" shows how he identifies himself as a writer. As we will see below, the development of other intellectual abilities through the project has led several participants to see themselves not only as writers, but as more rounded academics.

Participatory Action Research in el Metro

For some, *Rompemuros* was initially just an excuse to continue with Inside-Out, an escape from the monotony of prison life. However, by the time the second number of the journal was published, there was a shared confidence that the project was truly contributing to a change in consciousness and destigmatizing people in prison. Participants also began to recognize their abilities to converse with academic texts as experts on organized crime and prisons in Mexico. In other words, it was easy for them to enter academic debates as what Gramsci (1971) called "organic intellectuals." Until this point, I had never considered Inside-Out as part of my research. Suddenly aware of the group's collective academic identity and interest in sociopolitical praxis, I suggested framing *Rompemuros* as a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project.

Since the students' proposal to create a literary journal through Inside-Out was approved by prison authorities in December 2017, the project has evolved collectively. Each semester, the theme for the upcoming number of the journal is chosen democratically, and weekly readings are then selected in relation to this topic. To analyze the readings, we use a variety of classroom dynamics, facilitated by different group members; however, almost every session includes a collective Socratic dialogue, ironically founded upon Freirean principles. The discussions are guided by questions, though there is a conscious effort to avoid the inevitable relations of domination recognized by Socrates. In the spirit of upholding the values of respect, humility, trust, and critical thinking, participants are encouraged to be open and honest. Desks are always set up in a circle to minimize hierarchies, and the classroom is considered a safe-space where sincere reflection and personal stories can be shared without being criticized.

We use comments from these dialogues along with individual reflective writing as "research data." The first method (class discussions) often stimulates the second (individual writing). Most data used in this article come from texts published in the *Rompemuros* journal, available through the project's website (http://www.rompemuros.mx). However, regardless of the source, all citations are approved by the group before any research paper is submitted for publication.

In traditional science, those directly affected by a research topic tend to be research subjects. This project, however, is based on a conscious rejection of the positivist dichotomy that separates the researcher from the subjects (Abello Colak & Pearce, 2019). Here, our research findings come from a collective interest to produce and share knowledge on the topics of violence, injustice and transformative learning. In the words

of Rodríguez-Brandao, "It is not a matter of popularizing knowledge by mediocrity, but of democratizing the knowledge that is produced in the university, engaging it for the good of the people" (Flores et al., 2009, p. 300).

Recognizing that traditional research methods tend to reinforce oppressive power structures, especially in prisons, the value of collectively constructed knowledge is particularly important to us. As Pineda writes, "Here [in prison] the fight for justice and freedom is forgotten. They are just words without meaning, lacking content for praxis. How hopeless is this disguised policy that denies one the right to speak out." Contrary to the general domination by guards, administrators, and cartel leaders that seek to "render individuals docile and useful" for their own agendas (Foucault, 1975, p. 231), *Rompemuros* is often seen as a rare opportunity of liberating empowerment, in which participants develop a project based on their own interests. While the men are quick to note the power of individual autonomy when it comes to social integration, they also recognize the potential of this project's sociopolitical agenda. In sum, the purpose of this research is not limited to understanding or contributing to academic debates. The main objective is to open channels of communication through which participants can use their own abilities and experiences to address problems that directly affect them on both a micro and a macro level.

Participatory Action Research Obstacles in Prison

The regular challenges faced by participatory action research may be intensified in prison. For instance, almost all PAR is long-term, and loss of motivation among project participants is not unusual (Balcazar, 2003). This may be more of an issue in this case due to the emotional challenge of living in confinement. The sudden onset of depression, known in Mexican prisons as *el carcelazo,* can cause unexpected absences from class and setbacks in the plan to meet deadlines for the journal's biannual publication.

Delays may also be caused by prison authorities. Each number of the journal must go through a lengthy revision process, first in el Metro and then by the prison system's public relations department. Authorities have forbidden the publication of several texts, reasserting the power of the all-seeing panoptic eye of the prison system (Foucault, 1975). In response, rather than passively accepting the oppression, the group has worked to improve their writing skills to truthfully portray the reality of the system in a way that will make it through the various checkpoints between their notebooks and the printshop. For example, in his narrative "Unfinished story," Solorio reveals how he was tortured during his initial interrogation in the following excerpt:

> Where are the weapons?—asked the officer.
>
> What weapons?—I responded, with a certain shortness of breath.
>
> Where are the people, the offices?! Where are the bodies? Show us a mass grave!—he countered.

> The first night passed through continuous interrogation, and the only breaks were between shifts. Other officers arrived with renewed strength, or perhaps my diminished energy caused me to perceive them that way. The facilities of the [police station] have the capacity to produce murky memories, unpleasant ones that tend to return.

This exercise of power to avoid censorship by prison authorities is part of the emancipation often associated with *Rompemuros*. However, the project's fragility and the need to ensure a trusting relationship with both prison and university authorities in order for *Rompemuros* to continue remains a constant consideration.

Personal Transformation Through Rompemuros

Transformation is a basic concept in most penitentiary systems. With hope of transforming "criminals" into productive, law-abiding citizens through disciplinary measures, prisons have been the primary response to lawbreaking around the world since the early 19th century. Many institutions now use multifaceted programs combining education, job-training, counseling, and rehabilitation in an effort to "transform" prisoners. However, high recidivism rates suggest this model is far from successful.

Foucault (1975), Wacquant (2009) and others have argued that the true agenda for prisons is much more focused on control and maintaining race and class barriers necessary for the continued rise of neoliberalism (and in this case of the cartels). While these trends may be clear on a macro level, here we must recognize that the idea of "rehabilitation" has been largely accepted by the men involved in this PAR. Most relate their involvement in organized crime to a conscious, personal decision and consider themselves capable of turning their lives around (as seen in Solorio's first quote above). Thus, the reform discourse makes sense to them.

As more and more testimonies of conscientization and new life projects began to appear in class discussions and writing, we became collectively intrigued by the theory of transformative education. This theory enables us to explore how Inside-Out has stimulated changes in the way we formulate ideas and how we comprehend the social problems that originally brought us together. Let us begin by considering that this theory refers to learning "that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58). As in Freire's theory of critical pedagogy, dialogue is fundamental to this process. When compared to Freire's proposal, however, the theory of transformative learning focuses more on the self-reflexivity involved in critical dialogue. Mezirow (2002) emphasizes the importance of questioning the underlying assumptions and expectations that influence our beliefs, values, and feelings. Thus, in order for transformative learning to occur, we must consider how sociocultural factors contribute to the way we interpret a given idea.

The diversity of group members in this project is especially conducive to transformative dialogue, as the exchange of ideas from vastly different perspectives and

experiences invites us to either reaffirm or reconsider previously learned knowledge or thoughts. For example, in a discussion regarding a case where a victim of domestic violence killed her abusive boyfriend, Javier invited an outspoken feminist, Carolina, to reverse the genders in the case. "It would automatically be labeled a femicide," he argued, "with public pressure for the maximum sentence." After a moment of contemplation, Carolina, who had contended that the abused woman should not be punished said, "You know, you're right."

While dialogue often opens the door to self-reflexivity, it is further developed through personal writing that often reveals how one's understanding of a given social problem has changed. Gray et al. (2019) explain that learning is transformative when a person has the opportunity to form and re-form meaning as a continuous, iterative process. The editing process for texts to be published in *Rompemuros* generally involves several rounds of feedback on initial drafts, thus facilitating opportunities to reconsider one's ideas.

Gray and her colleagues also explore the reinvention of one's identity as a hallmark of transformation. As exemplified by Fernando's quote regarding "comrades from the world of literature," several participants have come to identify themselves more as students, writers, and intellectuals, rather than the labels associated with the crimes for which they are imprisoned.

Here it is important to recognize how identity is formed by social relationships (Zubiri, 2006). In this case, the group identity and friendships between inside and outside participants is particularly relevant. In addition to the college students who attend weekly classes, each semester includes workshops with writers and professors, some of whom continue to collaborate with the project by reviewing texts for the *Rompemuros* journal. Participants from both sides of the prison walls often note the relevance of sociocultural relationship barriers, commenting that they would likely never have had the opportunity to engage in reflexive dialogue with such a group were it not for this project.

Returning to the model of "corrections" implemented in most prisons, it is important to recognize that while transformative education can stimulate new identity traits, and "common prisoners" may develop critical thinking skills, this certainly does not guarantee they will no longer participate in illegal activities. That is, transformation through education is by no means a synonym for "criminal reform." Nevertheless, transformative learning should be recognized as a significant contribution to social (re) integration. This idea has been largely responsible for our collective interest in incorporating the theory of transformative education into our research. Figure 1 invites us to consider reflection, critical thinking, conscientization, and transformation as components in an on-going learning cycle. Testimonies collected through our PAR will help explain this paradigm.

While transformative learning can be seen as a continuous cycle, it begins with critical reflection, which requires us to recognize and analyze the underlying presumptions of our beliefs (Mezirow, 1990). When I ask for closing comments at the end of class, I regularly hear, "*Se nos movió el escombro*" (The rubble covering us was

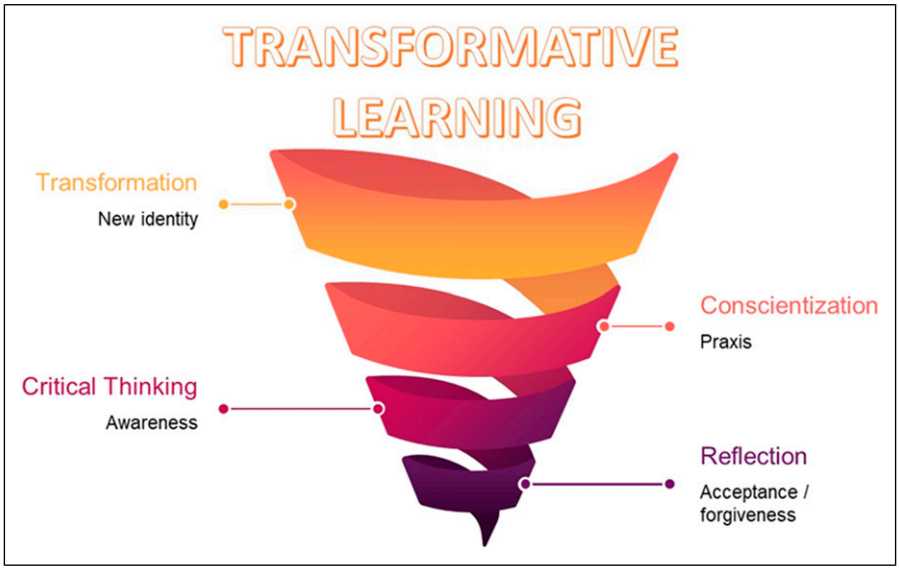

Figure 1. A transformative learning cycle.

moved). Whether they are referring to the rubble covering their emotions and personal traumas or the rubble generated by all that has been demolished through neoliberalism, this can be seen as evidence of *sentipensante* learning, which requires personal reflection (Fals Borda & Moncayo, 2009). In other words, they are recognizing how new knowledge changes the way they understand and feel about a certain issue.

Three testimonies from the end of the first semester in the program exemplify reflections that may be related to transformation. Reyes wrote the following: "I learned that not all people label us and that it is our obligation to show them how good we are and that we did make mistakes, but that some of us also regret what we have done and want to change." Similarly, Martín noted how group dialogue led him to consider his own role in the issues we addressed in class: "[It] made me see the social problems that arise in my country in a broader way. It made me see myself as part of them." A third example of transformative reflection can be seen in a testimony by one of the highest-ranking cartel members in the group, Pedro: "I became aware that when harm is caused, we do not see the stages that the victims go through. It made me recover a part of my humanity that I had lost."

The process could end here, with acceptance of one's actions, perhaps asking for forgiveness or forgiving oneself. However, this initial reflection can also evolve into critical thinking and a more systemic understanding of a given problem. It is often said that the greatest luxury in prison is time to think (and write). Bruce Franklin (1989) proposes "two overlapping groups of prison authors: the political activist thrust into prison and the common criminal thrust into political activism" (p. 242). Whitfield

(2018) goes on to offer a broader conceptualization of "political prisoners" by considering how "common prisoners" come to politicize their situations. After three semesters in Inside-Out, Pedro published a text in *Rompemuros* that illustrates this idea:

> When we place ourselves in dichotomous intellections that divide and separate society between "good and bad," between "those who comply and those who do not," we are inferring that we live in an "ideal society," where punitive justice or punishment is the solution for the evils that afflict us […] only if we believe that we live in an ideal society should we speak of social "re-insertion."

Here, Pedro recognizes the connection between personal and social reform and thus the need to contemplate transformation on both a micro and a macro level. By considering how one uses new knowledge to explore his own personal beliefs and feelings, Mezirow's theory can be used to compliment "Freirean critical thinking." This often results in recognizing limitations in our worldviews, like we saw in the debate between Javier and Carolina above. The connection between the *sentipensante* pedagogy used in this project and critical thinking is further revealed in one of Fernando's texts from the fourth volume of Rompemuros, published in 2019:

> [This project] gives me tools to create my own emotional shield against social vindictiveness and imaginary labels existing in my mind amidst injustice, mistreatment and abandonment, where corruption can be smelled and illegality stinks. Here, Inside-Out comes with that magic light that invites you to search for meaning in life. How gratifying it is to share our personal and collective ideas and to understand a country that moves with backwards feet.

The "emotional shield" Fernando claims to have constructed through transformative learning to protect himself from internalizing social stigma exemplifies another tie between Goffman's and Mezirow's theories in this project. This quote also underscores the importance of group dialogue to stimulate critical thinking.

Moving on to conscientization, one's view is broadened to consider the sociopolitical factors involved in a given problem. As isolated reflections are woven into a critical consciousness, a more complex worldview is developed, and praxis comes into play, once again linking personal and social transformation. Freire explains that recognizing a need for social change is a fundamental part of conscientization; Mezirow stresses the need for personal change, as well. The following testimony by Marcos shows the incorporation of both theories in his process of conscientization:

> Inside-Out is something different in my life, it has taught me the great problems we have in our justice system. The whole system needs to change, and society needs to change the way it views the prisoner, all those labels that divide us. We all need to change that negative chip for a positive one, because we are all part of society […] I hope this is just the beginning of something that changes the way justice is carried out in our country.

Exhausted by the system after thirty years of imprisonment, Pancho's testimony reveals similar signs of conscientization linked to praxis:

> The dynamic we achieved [in class] was impressive, because it left an aftermath that motivated and pushed us to change our vision and focus on crime prevention, social reintegration and inclusion. The conversations that we elaborated were woven together […] focusing on finding a solution, an objective that motivates change, where we yell, 'We have to do something to change the prison system and actually achieve reintegration for the inmate.'

Once again, we see a sense of emancipation in this testimony, inviting us to recognize how transformative learning can cultivate a consciousness of freedom within prison. Reflections on praxis from behind bars, such as these and Pineda's quote above, have become a fundamental part of our PAR. The urge to seek solutions for a given problem and to be part of the revolution one desires for the world thus exemplifies the conscientization that occurs in this project. As Luis Alberto summarizes,

> In the seven years I've been in prison, I can say that Inside-Out has been the best experience. Everything I've learned throughout the course will serve me, because I believe that we can all contribute to achieve that change that we all want; we just have to find that strength that we have within us and raise our voices, ACT.

According to Mezirow (2003, p. 61), transformation involves "insight into the source, structure, and history of a frame of reference, as well as judging its relevance, appropriateness, and consequences." Thus, the learner is able to analyze information and ideas from sociopolitical, ethical, and moral dimensions at micro as well as macro levels, and critical thinking may become a normal frame of reference (Sakinofsky et al., 2018). Framing this PAR as a permanent seminar has enabled our reflections to reach new depths each semester, liberating each of us from an increasing number of preconceived notions.

In addition to the continued evolution in how we form our ideas, as briefly noted earlier, several participants have related the theory of transformative learning to their development of "intellectual identities" (Gray et al., 2019), a rare characteristic among cartel members. Luis, the eldest student in the class, is a man of few words. He has accepted that he will likely spend his final days in prison, but finds pride and gratification in being part of the group. "It changes my way of wanting to learn and improve myself. I see that other people notice that I want to excel and continue learning, despite where we are." His feelings are echoed by Solorio who writes:

> Some see me with a certain envy, others encourage me, the common denominator is that I feel respected, because they notice that my interests are different. [I have learned] to express myself, to work with more educated people and not feel inferior, to accept when they correct me.

He goes on to claim:

> I have cultivated a deeper kind of tolerance that frees me from a high percentage of prejudice. This experience has a great motivational value and fills me with energy to continue on this journey, because now I know that not everything is dark. There are people free from the burden of judging ahead of time, without knowing the person.

This quote suggests changes in Solorio's perception-making process, being less reactive and more reflexive. The freedom from prejudice he mentions, is a two-tiered aspiration for our group. We not only seek to recognize and overcome our own preconceptions of others, but also to strengthen our self-esteem so as not to be affected by social stigmas, or as Fernando would say, to construct a shield to protect oneself. Solorio's recognition of people who are less judgmental is likely related to his experience with outside participants in the project, just as Reyes explained above. In the words of Fernando,

> Starting the project, I quickly became optimistic. With my fellow prisoners and this great team of young people from educational institutions, with fresh minds and ideas [...] together we discover the method that invites us to go further, we discover something good there within us, a New Vision for seeing life, with abilities that were asleep [...] that gives life.

The combination of different sociocultural views that enrich our dialogue has undoubtedly transformed how many of us see ourselves, how we relate to others, and how we formulate ideas. However, the sense of liberation within prison, that comes with praxis to confront social stigma and multifaceted oppression, is likely the greatest accomplishment to have been attributed to the transformative learning that takes place in this project thus far.

Final Reflections

Prison systems tend to be much more successful reinforcing social divisions than they are at reducing recidivism. As Foucault (1975) explains, one of the greatest accomplishments of prisons is dividing the working class against itself to prevent revolution. In Mexico, the *autogobierno* that controls many prisons further prevents the uprising of the masses. Thus, although cartels have destabilized formal power structures throughout the country, in prisons they tend to maintain "colonial hierarchies" (Salvatore & Aguirre, 1996).

The fragility of the Mexican State, considered the most corrupt of the 34 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), is highly relevant here. With over 52 million people living below the poverty line and approximately 40% of the nation's wealth concentrated in 1% of the population, structural as well as criminal violence have become accepted norms throughout the nation. Hence, the rise of Mexican cartels can be seen as a form of "globalization from below"

(Alba Vega et al., 2015). Income from the drug trade and other forms of organized crime has allowed part of the lower class to "dig themselves out of the rubble" and resolve their own economic problems under the same neoliberal principals that have caused so much damage and inequality.

Whether or not incarcerated cartel members want to be "(re)inserted" into the legal socioeconomic system that offers little opportunity for the masses is not the focus of this research. However, the logic of "rehabilitation" is something that resonates with the men who participate in this PAR, even as they gain a more critical understanding of social stigma and structural violence. Recognizing themselves as part of society, despite the multitude of discriminatory practices that exclude them, they strive for both individual and social transformation. Though I cannot speak to their present and future involvement in organized crime, their testimonies reveal conscientization, changes in the ways they perceive themselves and others, and a sense of emancipation, all of which they attribute to Inside-Out.

While the ripple of change created by this small participatory action research project is basically imperceptible in the sea of criminal justice problems, it offers a powerful indication of the potential for transformative learning in prisons. Through this project, we have all developed a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of organized crime, as well as personal and collective aptitudes to address these problems through praxis. Some have also recognized transformations in their personal identity and their perception-making processes. Thus, such programs should by no means be limited to minor "offenders" with the narrow agenda of reducing recidivism rates.

Although the impact of *autogobiernos* has not been documented, it appears that most "educational" opportunities in Mexican prisons are aimed at forming criminals to benefit the cartels. As Pedro explains, "Life in prison is like going on a retreat. Calling prison the 'University of Crime' says it very well, it's an internment where you learn more about what you do and improve business skills and relations."

I cannot claim that the transformations attributed to this PAR enable participants to truly free themselves from the cartel or from the social stigma they have acquired. However, I am confident that we will all use this experience to make positive social contributions in one form or another. In sum, the power of education in prisons is undeniable; the opportunity lies in how critical thinking is guided.

Acknowledgments

The author hereby acknowledges the contributions of the participants in the *Rompemuros* participatory action research project in the *Reclusorio Metropolitano del Estado de Jalisco* to this paper. Most data used in this article comes from texts published in the *Rompemuros* journal, available at www.rompemuros.mx

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Rebecca Danielle Strickland https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2410-0650

Notes

1. This translates to approximately 142 incarcerated individuals per 100,000 habitants, compared to 698 per 100,000 habitants in the United States.
2. This center, known as CEFERESO #2, was closed in September 2020.
3. The Inside-Out teaching certification courses are intensive week long trainings (60 contact hours). Three days of training are held inside the prison. In August 2018, 16 professors from four Mexican universities were certified.
4. All citations referenced with a single name come from participants incarcerated in el Metro.

References

Abello Colak, A., & Pearce, J. (2019). Co construyendo seguridad "desde abajo": Una metodología para repensar y transformar la seguridad en contextos de violencia crónica. In G. Kloppe-Santamaría & A. Abello Colak (Eds.), *Seguridad humana y violencia crónica en México. Nuevas lecturas y propuestas desde abajo* (pp. 35–69). Porrúa. https://www.lse.ac.uk/lacc/publications/PDFs/Seguridad-humana-y-violencia-cronica-en-Mexico.pdf.

Alba Vega, C., Mathews, G., & Ribeiro, G. L. (2015). *La globalización desde abajo: La otra economía mundial*. Fondo Cultural Económica.

Balcazar, F. E. (2003). Investigación acción participativa (iap): Aspectos conceptuales y dificultades de implementación. *Fundamentos en Humanidades*, *IV*(7-8), 59-77. https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/184/18400804.pdf.

CNDH (2019). *Diagnóstico Nacional de Supervisión Penitenciaria (DNSP)*. https://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/all/doc/sistemas/DNSP/DNSP_2019.pdf

DIGPRES. (2020). *Segundo Informe de Resultados 2019-2020*. Gobierno del Estado de Jalisco.

El Informador. (2013). *Inauguran nuevo reclusorio Metropolitano*. El Informador. http://www.informador.com.mx/jalisco/2013/438568/6/inauguran-nuevo-reclusorio-metropolitano.html.

Fals Borda, O., & Moncayo, V. M. (2009). *Una sociología sentipensante para América Latina*. CLACSO.

Flores, E., Montoya, J., & Suárez, D. (2009). Investigación-acción participativa en la educación latinoamericana: Un mapa de otra parte del mundo. *Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa*, *14*(40), 289–308. https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/140/14004013.pdf.

Foucault, M. (1975). *Discipline and punish. The birth of the prison*. Vintage Books.

Franklin, H. B. (1989). *Prison literature in America: The victim as criminal and artist*. Oxford University Press.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5583-7_610.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Simon & Schuster.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. International Publishers.

Gray, N., Ward, J., & Fogarty, J. (2019). Transformative learning through university and prison partnerships: Reflections from "learning together" pedagogical practice. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*, *6*(1), 7–24. https://doi.org/10.25771/jbrt-q510.

INEGI. (2017). *Estadísticas sobre el sistema penitenciario estatal en México*. http://www.cdeunodc.inegi.org.mx/unodc/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/en_numeros2.pdf.

INEGI. (2019). *Censo Nacional de Gobierno, Seguridad Pública y Sistema Penitenciario Estatales 2018*. https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/cngspspse/2018/.

Inside-Out. (2021). *Infographic*. http://www.insideoutcenter.org/PDFs_new/InfoGraphic_February2021.pdf.

Mezirow, J. (1990). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood. A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Mezirow, J. (2002). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *1997*(74), 5–12. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.7401.

Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education*, *1*(1), 58–63. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344603252172

Sakinofsky, P., Amigo, M., & Janks, A. (2018). Green sprouts: Transformative learning in learning through participation. *Educational Research for Social Change*, *7*(2), 132–145

Salvatore, R., & Aguirre, C. (1996). *The birth of the penitentiary in Latin America: Essays on criminology, prison reform and social control, 1830-1940*. University of Texas Press.

UDLAP. (2020). *Índice global de Impunidad 2020*. https://www.udlap.mx/cesij/files/indices-globales/0-IGI-2020-UDLAP.pdf.

Wacquant, L. (2009). *Punishing the poor: The neoliberal government of social insecurity*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2311.2011.00695_1.x.

Whitfield, J. (2018). *Prison writing of Latin America*. https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.13124.

Zubiri, X. (2006). *Tres dimensiones del ser humano: Individual, social, histórica*. Alianza Editorial.

Author Biography

Since graduating from Kenyon College with a degree in International Studies in 2002, Danielle has been fighting inequality and structural violence in Mexico through formal and informal education. She has worked as a street educator with several NGOs, a teacher at various levels (from preschool to PhD seminars), and taught in prisons in Mexico City and the state of Jalisco. In 2004, she completed a Master's in International Education from Framingham State College and founded the non-profit *Colectivo Pro Derechos de la Niñez, A.C.* (CODENI) with a model based on critical pedagogy to help families who survive from informal commerce in the streets of downtown Guadalajara. In 2012 she earned a PhD in Social Sciences from the *Centro de Investigaciones y*

Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS), and the following year she received second place in the IX Award for Research on Civil Society from the *Centro Mexicano para la Filantropía* (CEMEFI) for her thesis: "Street Interfaces: Accomplishments, Challenges and Opportunities for Non-profit Organizations."

Danielle now works full time as a professor / researcher in the Department of Psychology, Education and Health of ITESO, Jesuit University of Guadalajara, coordinates the Inside-Out International Prison Exchange Program in Mexico, and is president of AHALA Children's Rights Foundation. She is a member of the National System of Researchers in Mexico (Level 1), and has published three books and over 20 papers on educational projects with marginalized youth and prisoners in Mexico. She also serves as a specialist in Security and Justice for the citizen observatory *Jalisco Cómo Vamos* and as a member of the Editorial Board of the Mural newspaper.