This study explores the impact of post-secondary correctional education (PSCE) on those released from prison, with special attention paid to individuals’ sense of self-efficacy and personal agency. A review of the literature indicates the vast majority of people who enter prison will one day return to society. These returning citizens face a number of hurdles as they work to reconstruct life outside of prison and avoid recidivism. Prior research suggests education is positively correlated with successful reentry into society. Unfortunately, there are few opportunities to pursue education past the secondary level in prison, which limits access to the corollary benefits of higher education.

The current study, situated within the transformative research paradigm, recognizes that multiple realities are constructed and shaped by
social, political, cultural, economic, and racial/ethnic forces, and attempts to capture the authentic experiences/voice of participants. As a result, a phenomenological research methodology was employed to capture the experiences of selected individuals who (a) participated in some form of post-secondary education while incarcerated (PSCE), and (b) successfully completed parole and were under no form of correctional supervision at the time of the interview. A community liaison auditor was employed to help recruit a total of eight men who all identified as African American or Black. Individuals participated in an initial interview no longer than 90 minutes. Participants were then provided with a transcript and summary of their interview, and provided with an opportunity to ensure the accuracy of the transcript and summary and provide participants an opportunity to clarify. The transcripts were then analyzed and 15 themes were identified. These themes included participants’ perceptions of the changes they experienced across a number of areas of their lives as a result of participating in PSCE from goal setting to parenting, as well as shifts in perception of their previous crimes. Themes additionally highlighted their growth in motivation to change. Participants were also invited to share their thoughts about PSCE with individuals currently in prison.

Participants articulated both breadth and depth of transformative experiences related to their participation in PSCE. These findings help provide a window into the components and processes of pro-social change associated with PSCE. The findings of this study are helpful in understanding the experiences of PSCE among a group of men who successfully reentered the community and completed parole. Additionally, the findings may be helpful and important in understanding the role opportunities for PSCE play in the success of men re-entering the community from prison. Key considerations are identified and discussed, and implications considered.