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# Action research: working with transformational intent

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# Action research: working with transformational intent

## **Abstract**

In this paper we present the history and background of action research. We identify the way in which action research has evolved over time, reflecting paradigmatic shifts towards contemporary philosophies of emancipation and transformation. Because of the way in which the paradigms underpinning action research have evolved, the methodology has also developed, with an increasing emphasis on maximising the potential for collaboration and participation. We will argue that the most recent representation of action research as 'transformational research' has pushed the boundaries of research even further and has challenged dominant thinking about the way research is conducted. A case study of transformational action research derived from an ongoing project in Australia is presented to illustrate the methodology in action. Finally, a discussion of key issues arising from the case study in the context of action research theory and practice highlights the importance of active learning as a means of enabling transformation to happen.

## **Keywords**

Action research, transformational action research, emancipatory action research, practice development, human flourishing

## **Disciplines**

Medicine and Health Sciences | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Brendan McCormack and Jan Dewing

*Peer reviewed article*

## Introduction

Action research has a long and established history as a methodology for the bringing about of social change in a systematic way whilst simultaneously developing new knowledge about the processes involved and the outcomes achieved. In this paper the history and methodological evolution of action research will be outlined as well as a critique of methods. An on-going case study of a particular approach to action research (transformational action research) will be described. Findings from this case study are not presented in this paper as the overall analysis of the data collected is on-going and will be reported in a separate paper. Instead, the case study is presented as a means of illustrating transformational action research in practice. Finally, a discussion of issues for consideration when working with emancipatory and transformational intent will be presented, drawing on previously

discussed methodological principles and issues arising from the case study.

## The History of Action Research

Action research can be considered to be a strategy that brings about social change through action, resulting in the development and improvement of practice, whilst simultaneously, generating and testing theory.

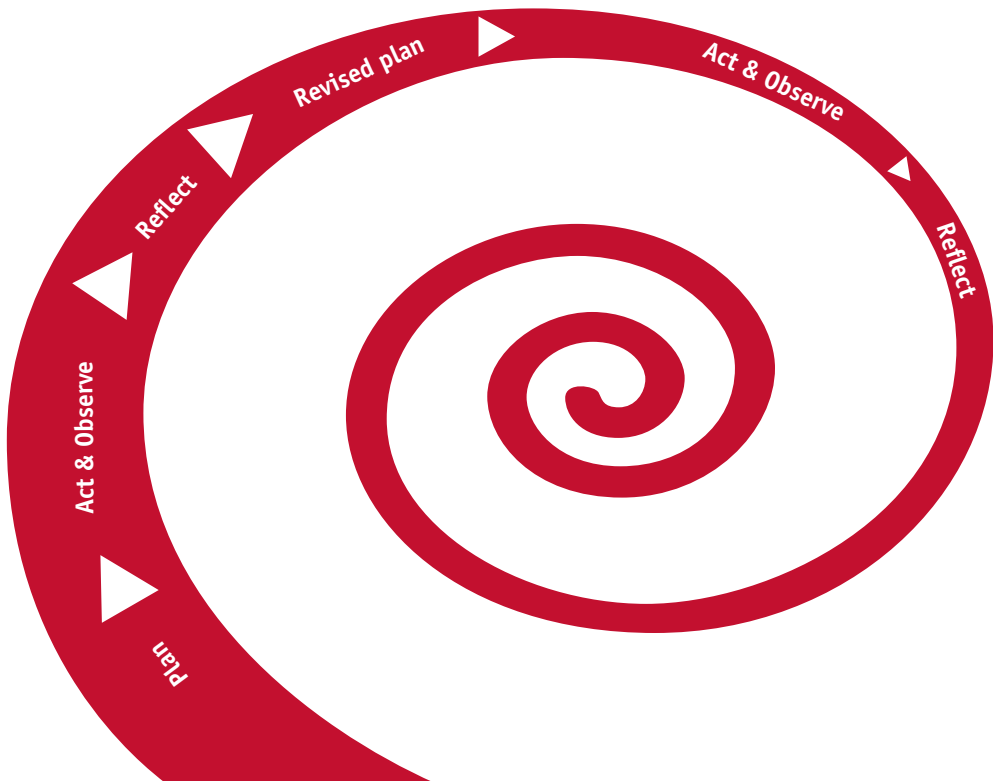
Action research has its origins in the 1940s when Kurt Lewin, a German social psychologist, developed group participatory processes for addressing problems in organisations. Lewin discovered that social change was more effective when team members collaborated on the reaching of solutions to problems of effectiveness in organisations (1). Lewin coined the phrase 'ac-

tion research' to capture the cycles of problem identification, planning for action, taking action, reflection on action, learning from action and re-planning for action etc. Lewin observed that meaningful change arose from group collective action that was systematically planned through multiple cycles of problem identification, planning, action, reflection and learning (Figure 1).

Thus Lewin defined action research as "a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action". By comparative research, Lewin was referring to the reflexive nature of the processes involved and the need to compare the outcomes for action with the social context in which they are located.

Since Lewin's work, there have been many

developments in advancing the theory and practice of action research, including the work of 'The Tavistock Institute' in London which adopted a 'social-technical systems theory approach' (see [moderntimesworkplace.com/archives/archives.html](http://moderntimesworkplace.com/archives/archives.html) for a detailed account of the work of the Tavistock Institute) and Educational Action Research with the work of the educational philosopher, John Dewey (2) who believed that educators should engage in community problem-solving in order to address social issues through educational action. These early pioneering developments in social action and research informed and shaped theoretical and methodological developments in research that legitimised the integration of action with theory generation and challenged dominant positivist world-views.



**Figure 1.** Group collective action.

## Methodological Perspectives

In order to achieve the dual purposes of bringing about social change through action whilst simultaneously generating and testing theory, a number of principles underpin the practice of action research, including:

- Meaningful action arises when participants improve and develop better understandings of practice.
- Capacity for innovation is realised and change is facilitated.
- Practice values are realised.
- Professional learning and reflective practice is facilitated.
- Practitioners are helped to research their own practice.
- Professional practice is democratized and reformed

... and simultaneously generating and testing theory

However, how these principles are achieved depends on the paradigmatic framework underpinning the research and the methodology adopted. Action research can be seen to be located within 4 different paradigms. The *technical* paradigm which shaped Lewin's work is influenced by the empirico-analytical paradigm and focuses on achieving solutions to problems through measurement, testing, explaining and generalising. The early action researchers like Lewin, worked through experimentation with different strategies and solutions and whilst they adhered to the principles of participation, the power and expertise for decision-making lay with the researcher/lead facilitator. In contrast the *practical* approach to action research which underpins the work of the Tavistock Institute and approaches to practitioner research is located in an interpretative paradigm where the emphasis is on 'meaning making' and the taking of action arising from the development of shared interpretations of social reality. Actors shape their reality through their interpretations of the social world and therefore

there are multiple interpretations of reality and thus multiple potentials for action. Developing a shared understanding of potential action is important to this way of working. *Emancipatory* action research is located within a critical paradigm. **Social structures and culture shape practice** and people need to be empowered to take action and change social structures when these are seen to be oppressive or limit the potential of actors to achieve emancipation. Emancipatory action research has been influenced by the work of philosophers/theorists such as Jürgen Habermas (3,4), Paulo Freire (5) and Brian Fay (6). *Transformational* action research **promotes transformation** as both end and means of research. So, in addition to knowledge creation, there is a concern with transformation of ourselves as researchers and, if they so wish, transformation of co-researchers, participants and other stakeholders ... [T]ransformational research can lead to human flourishing, in creative, spiritual and ethical senses, of both recipients of the research and those undertaking it (7).

Drawing on principles of co-operative inquiry (8) and creativity (9), transformational action research promotes action through creative imagination and artistic expression, and derives from an eclectic understanding of knowledge – whilst empirical knowledge is important, transformational action research aims to access embodied and artistic knowledge, as well as emotional and spiritual intelligences. These varying forms of knowledge and intelligences are seen as critical to enable 'human flourishing' which is the ultimate purpose of transformational action research (9). More recently, Titchen & McCormack (10,11) have elaborated the philosophy, theory, and methodology of transformational action research and their implications for the practice epistemology (knowledge and ways of knowing) and ontology (ways of being) of the action researcher. Their approach to transformational action research is located in a new paradigmatic synthesis for transformational action research called *Critical Creativity*. This synthesis combines

the assumptions of critical social science (3,4) and the theories of critical social theory (6) with creative imagination and expression, ancient wisdom and reflection (9). *Being critical* means deconstructing, consciously and cognitively, a context, situation, crisis, contradiction or dilemma, politically, socially, historically, culturally, then re-constructing it to develop new understanding for the purposes of transformation of practice and generation of new knowledge. *Being creative* means using creative imagination and expression to grasp the meaning of the whole, to create and/or release energy for development and research and bring embodied and imaginative meaning into cognitive critique. The key idea is that when the critical and creative is blended in action research work, we increase potential for our own and others' transformation and flourishing, by opening up cognitive and metaphorical spaces for the exploration of possible actions that can be taken and how people can go about these. In doing this, it adds to the body of possible methods and processes people have for personal and social transformations. Thus critical creativity is a way of being, knowing, doing and becoming that brings together our critical and creative selves as we seek to understand and facilitate the transformation of practice and, simultaneously, create new knowledge about that transformation.

Transformational action research as critical creativity is put into action through *praxis* (mindful action with the moral intent of human flourishing) (11). Praxis is enabled by *professional artistry* (12) which is the capacity to be attuned in a situation and to blend, synchronise, balance and interplay, different kinds of knowledge, ways of knowing and intelligences and engage in cognitive and artistic critique. Thus the methodological framework assumes that action researchers

are facilitators of experiential learning accompanying others on journeys of transformation.

## A Case Study of Transformational Action Research

In order to illustrate the practice of transformational action research, a case study of an ongoing programme of work is offered – “Aspire to Inspire: Enhancing the Person-Centred Culture in Aged Care in Australia”. The structures and processes being used in the programme are described. Evaluation findings are not presented as the overall analysis of these findings is still ongoing. Thus the study is presented as an illustration of transformational action research methods and not as a report of study findings. These will be reported separately.

### Context

This ongoing three year programme of action research and associated multi method evaluation is taking place in Uniting Care Ageing South Eastern Region Australia<sup>1</sup> (2009-2012) and in partnership with The University of Wollongong NSW.

This region of Uniting Care Ageing had experimented with various person-centred initiatives over a decade and none of them proved to be the solutions that were hoped for. This might be because the leaders of the organisation had unrealistic hopes and expectations but also because many of the initiatives may have promised more than they could deliver. Additionally, it is our contention that any initiative that simply primes a large scale transformation such as this through training and does not then facilitate the actual implementation, is likely to have a limited

1 Uniting Care Ageing is the largest provider of residential long-term care services to older people in New South Wales [NSW] and Australian Capital Territories [ACT]. Uniting Care Ageing offers care in a range of accommodation settings including high care, residential care, retirement living, community care, day centres, private nursing services and respite care. The organisation has a core philosophy of creating cultures of care that enable all service users, residents, staff and families to grow, develop and flourish.

and short term impact and result in innovation-evaporation (13). In this programme, practice development is being strategically placed to provide the organisation with a structured framework to assist in its drive for a person-centred culture. Thus developing practice through multiple and complementary methods derived from emancipatory and transformational action research frameworks was identified as being critical to achieving a person-centred culture for effective practice.

The programme includes all the high and low care residential long term care facilities including dementia care (N=15), plus day care and community care services (N =5) across New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. Briefly, high-level care is for people who need 24-hour nursing care, whilst low-level care places are for people who need some help but are mostly able to contribute some self care and can walk or move about on their own. These numbers also include a small number of services for people within the Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander communities and culturally and language diverse communities. In addition, this programme has made specific provision to include the regional office administration, support and managerial staff. Funding for the programme has mainly come from within the organisation.

### Aims and Objectives

The ultimate aim of the programme is to improve well being for older people and staff. Thus the term person-centred care in this programme is not only concerned with the care older people receive but it also focuses on the management and organisational systems available to all staff to support working in person-centred ways. The objectives are;

1. To develop demonstrative ownership and commitment in staff for the core values of

the organisation in their every day work

2. To systematically implement a set of effective methods and processes to embed the INSPIRE<sup>2</sup> values within everyday practice
3. To test and evaluate the applicability of a specific person-centred framework in the Australian Aged Care context and use this framework to achieve implementation of the INSPIRE values
4. To develop a knowledge and skills set in transformational research and development methods
5. To evaluate the engagement of managers with the programme
6. To influence organizational policy and development in person-centred practice

## Methodology

The methodology of the programme builds on the learning from a previous programme of transformational research (14-16) and draws on principles from different yet complementary theories and approaches; transformational action research (9), emancipatory practice development (17), Positive Organisational Scholarship (18), a specific person-centred practice framework (19) and 'Active Learning' (20,21). Within the aims of this programme, particular emphasis is placed on evaluation and on learning by skilled facilitators working within different roles in the organisation.

### Ethics

The research programme was approved by the ethics committees of the University of Wollongong and the South East Sydney and Illawarah Area Health Service – the health region within which the services are located.

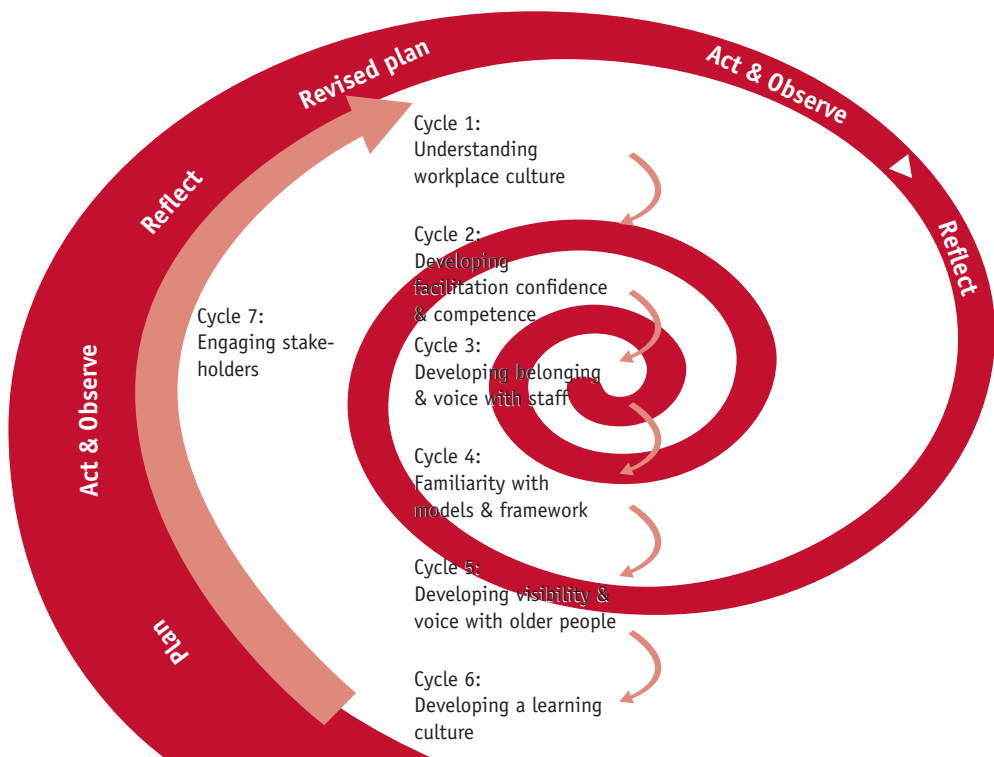
2 Inspire Values are a set of shared values which underpin the organisations' strategic plan 2006-11 known as Inspired Care - Courage; Integrity; Compassion; Respect; Community and Growth. Hence the development and research programme is named 'Aspire to Inspire'.

### *Programme Structure and Processes*

All the services are grouped together loosely into geographically associated 'hubs', each hub has 2 external facilitators. These facilitators are people who already work in a variety of management, leadership and clinical roles in the region and their facilitation role is integrated with their usual work. The intention is to demonstrate that a variety of people across an organisation can be coached to become transformational facilitators of person-centred practice and cultures. Through the wide range of roles the external facilitators hold, they are able to influence at a corporate level and within business and support services as well as the care or clinical service. This they have learnt is essential for enhancing person-centred care across all of an organisation and not just within the care giving moments or immediate care context. It also helps prepare for longer term sustainability beyond the life of the programme.

Multi-faceted practice development programme groups were established at each site and an internal facilitator appointed from within the team itself (internal facilitators were selected by the teams themselves). The participants from the sites met with the internal and external facilitators for a formal programme and skills development day every 6 weeks drawing on Active Learning principles. As the first year progressed, a range of interim sessions and discussion groups were established within the workplaces in between these days. In year two, these then evolved into project working and action plan implementation groups.

In the first year, the programme simultaneously focused on the themes of: (i) developing an understanding of what workplace culture is and how it is recreated by teams (ii) establishing confidence and competence amongst external and internal facilitators as transformational researchers in the workplace (iii) developing a sense of group belonging and voice for staff (iv) becoming



**Figure 2.** Programme cycles of action and learning.



ing familiar with the Person Centred Framework and Practice Development Model as the frameworks used for the programme and for achieving the above (v) developing the visibility and voice of older people about their needs (vi) developing a learning culture and (vii) engaging stakeholders including managers. In effect, these foci became cycles of learning and action for people involved in the programme (see Figure 2).

The number of cycles, the intensity of each and the interactions between cycles varied from person to person and again varied across the team as has been commented on by others (22). Thus, there was the potential for complex dynamics between people working on the programme as they each embarked on and then sustained their own learning paths.

In year two, programme facilitators and participants worked more intentionally with locally collected evidence to develop and then implement action plans to achieve wider organisational involvement and more active engagement by managers. For example, managers established their own practice development workshops and performance indicators that include: staff participation in Aspire events; undertaking narratives with older people and reporting of evidence of monthly feedback from staff. This has become another dynamic set of learning and action cycles within the programme.

The outcomes from previous similar research (14,15) demonstrated that transformational work can enable the delivery of complex practice development activity, work based learning and skills development that will produce improvements in care and the workplace culture. In turn these outcomes will enable further emancipatory and for some transformational action. In year three, the focus of learning and action cycles are about repetition and embedding what is working well in the context and joining up this work with other initiatives in the region and national organisation.

### Evaluation

A multi-method design with three data collection time points has been adopted, beginning in year 2 (as the focus in year 1 was on establishing the programme structures and processes). Evaluation has focused on identifying key changes in the context of care provision and the experiences of care and caring by older people themselves and care staff. The evaluation themes and methods being used are shown in Table 1,

Although the first round of evaluation data has been collected, analysed and is being used to shape local action plans and wider organisational planning, it is too early to say what the outcomes are for the well-being of older people and the overall development of person-centred practice

Evaluation Focus and link with Study Objectives	Evaluation Methods
Evaluation of changes to the practice context (Objectives 1 and 2)	The Context Assessment Index <sup>16</sup>
Evaluation of changes in the practice cultures towards ones that are more person-centred (Objectives 3 and 6)	Workplace Culture Critical Analysis Tool <sup>27</sup>
Evaluation of older persons' experiences of care (Objectives 2,3 and 6)	User Narratives <sup>28</sup>
Evaluation of older persons' sense of well-being (Objective 3 and 6)	One on one interviews with older people and others significant to them
Evaluation of the experiences of Indigenous Elders (Objective 3 and 6)	Focus groups with Indigenous Elders
Evaluation of the development of knowledge and skills in transformational research and development methods (Objective 4 and 6)	Interviews with staff
Evaluation of the engagement of managers in the programme (Objective 5 and 6)	Structured observation of managers' meeting

**Table 1.** Evaluation foci and methods.

in the participating care settings. However, this collaborative group poem by the participants in the research programme illustrates how the transformational processes being used 'hold' participants as they move slowly through processes of enlightenment, both personal and social:

### The Search

When do we leave?  
How are we getting there?  
Who else is coming?  
I can't leave now  
I have too many responsibilities  
We are coming too  
We have a map, a guide, and the compass  
Trust ...

Why are we going?  
Who thought of this?  
Haven't we been there before?  
I am scared  
I am busy  
We promise it will be worth it  
We can find it if we work together  
Trust us...

What are we looking for?  
Who can help us find what we are looking for?  
Aren't we supposed to be caring for them?  
I feel like we are in a whirlpool  
I feel like my hand is tied behind my back  
We have ideas  
We have light shining from within us  
We trust you...  
What is that?  
Was that supposed to be like that?  
Why isn't everyone coming?  
I can't see clearly...  
I am in mist and the dark  
We see sunshine  
We see butterflies  
We are beginning to trust others...

Did you hear what we did?  
Did you see what happened?

Do you think we are going in the right direction?

I am still going; one foot in front of the other

I sometimes have to step softly, other times I run for joy

We are growing

We make mistakes but accept that

We know we still have a long way to go

We trust each other...

## Discussion

"... people need to be able to take on a different view of things and able to see a different kind of potential when the whole system is kind of set up in a particular way and how do you change it? Because you've got ... people in clinical settings who have all been socialised in this system and what I think it needs is actually a complete culture shift, a shift in philosophical values, to see people as people who have responsibility for their own health and come into a system that should not totally remove that, that kind of ownership" (23)

The above quote comes from previous research into the meaning of autonomy for older people in hospital. This hermeneutic research identified the contextual conditions within practice settings that prevented nurses and other care workers from engaging effectively with older people and in ways that maximised their potential for rehabilitation and recovery. However, it further illustrates a strength of transformational action research as illustrated in the case study described here, whilst the research (23) identified these contextual conditions, the methodology did not lend itself to changing them.

Transformational action research enables such a cultural shift to take place, as not only does it develop shared meanings about the need for social action, in line with practical and eman-

cupatory intent (3), it also commits to bringing about such action and evaluating its effectiveness, whilst simultaneously enabling the creativity inherent in all human beings to be released for positive change and human flourishing. It is the release of this creativity that is at the heart of transformational action research and which Titchen and McCormack (11) have argued, enables meaningful culture change to happen and be embedded in practice cultures. The 'Aspire to Inspire' case study is a good example of the way in which transformational research processes release the creativity inherent in clinical teams and enables this creativity to be translated into meaningful action.

Active learning as a strategy within transformational action research creates the conditions for practitioners and service leaders/managers to take responsibility for the social significance of action and to become empowered to change. Influenced by the philosophy of Paulo Freire (5), this approach to learning is concerned with praxis, which Freire articulated as action that is informed (by theory) and embedded in certain values. In the case of active learning in the context of transformational action research, we view these values as those concerned with 'human flourishing' (11). The engagement processes of active learning are cooperative in nature and thus are consistent with Freire's ideas of 'dialogue' and enhancing community through social action. Dewing (21) argues that active learning synthesises the essence of transformational action research into practical strategies that are located in the world-view of the practitioner and as a result, there is a direct connection between learning, practice and social reform. This combination of action research and active learning illustrates the strengths of transformational action research and its potential to overcome perceived barriers between knowledge generation and knowledge utilisation (24,25). Indeed it could be argued that the wide-spread adoption of transformational action research as methodology could result in major system change and

an erosion of knowledge utilisation barriers. In the context of the case study outlined in this paper, the processes being used in the programme are delivering multiple and complex transformational activities across a large regional organization that are contributing to improvements in team and workplace cultures. These improvements are generally the antecedents and attributes needed for an effective workplace culture (such as role clarification; support and challenge; leadership development; involvement and participation by stakeholders; positive attitude to change and more open communication) (19).

Contemporary healthcare policy and strategy emphasises the need for care systems to be responsive to individual patient needs and to be adaptive in the way that care is delivered. The issue of practitioners' ability to accept the potential choices that many patients might make, that is, if they had the choice to do so, is one of the biggest challenges faced in working in a person-centred way (19). Practitioners need to be able to balance their technical competence and expertise and their professional caring roles with patients' understandings of their own well-being and their potential futures. Many practitioners appear to get stuck in their practice, i.e. they adopt ritualistic and routinised approaches to their ways of working. This can happen because of a failure to recognise alternative approaches and/or a failure of organisations to create a learning culture that supports the flourishing of staff. Whilst contemporary health and social care organisations are continuously changing (largely structural and systems change) it is our contention that within such change programmes, strategies for releasing the critical creativity of staff are rarely paid attention. Over laden with numerous regulatory, quality assurance and competency frameworks, health and social care practitioners adopt the kinds of behaviours that these same programmes espouse to change (24). Practitioners need to be able to explore their own values and beliefs about practice and have facilitation mechanisms available to them to translate these values into practice and

enable their flourishing as persons. In the case study described in this paper, a context is being created that enables staff to articulate these values and translate them into meaningful actions that enables flourishing of residents and staff.

Whilst transformational action research predicates a values-driven and person-centred approach to practice change, working in a person-centred way requires both personal bravery and supported development to make the necessary changes. The personal bravery arises from individual recognition of the need for change and the organisational structure that supports a learning culture. The adherence to principles of collaboration, inclusion and participation (26) ensures that potentially 'brave' action becomes shared action that is set within cycles of planning, action, reflection, learning and ongoing action. In this way, transformational action research enables new ideas to flourish and grow in practice, and the facilitation approaches used, hold a space for practitioners to develop strategies that can traverse the complexities of these (sometimes competing) agendas.

## Conclusions

In this paper we have presented the evolution of action research and highlighted the way in which that evolution has resulted in contemporary action research practice that has a focus on 'transformation'. However, not all action research is transformational in intent or outcome and like all research methodologies, the aims and focus of the research need to determine the approach adopted. Even then, transformational outcomes cannot be guaranteed. Transformational action research has the specific focus of enabling human flourishing through the integration of cognitive and creative critique and the facilitation of social action. This kind of action research is still in the early stages of development and ongoing work is needed to rigorously 'test out' approach-

es and methods that enable meaningful transformation to happen.

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