Foreword

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Transformative Learning: Reflections on opportunities and challenges

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It is my pleasure to introduce these papers for this issue of IJTR. All four papers share a common interest in the idea of transformative research, long associated with action-oriented research approaches, and with community, workplace and adult learning. The word transformative suggests that there is a different, and better, way of understanding ourselves and of living our lives; research is not just about acquiring knowledge of a topic, it also involves questioning what is taken for granted and addressing life's problems. A transformed understanding is deeper, more nuanced, more ethical and more action oriented than we had before. Through transformative research we become better able to construct our own interpretations of events and set our own goals of future action. Transformative researchers engage with values and beliefs and are committed to listening to the voices of participants, and stakeholders in general, and working towards solutions that involve everyone. Transformative research gives us a better idea of what enables and constrains our achievements at both a personal and structural level. Of course, not all research needs to be packaged as transformative but when there are deep problems of personal, professional or academic practice that need attending to, and new ways of understanding these problems are needed, then transformative approaches come into their own.

Transformative approaches should not, however, be romanticised and the tensions and difficulties should not be under-estimated. As the papers in this edition show transformative research can produce ethical dilemmas and impose constraints on research practice. However, and in different ways, the authors suggest that transformative approaches are worth the effort.

There are four papers in this issue: Khan (2021) exploring ethical dilemmas in a clinical setting; Rahman, Lund, Alamin, Krogh and Gjøtterud (2021) on transforma-

tive journeys to becoming action researchers; Kavanagh, Sexton, and Fitzsimons's (2021) research on middle leadership in post-primary schools; O'Connor's (2021) work on the transformative power of education among former offenders.

The ethical dilemmas are played out in the first of our papers. Here, Khan explores an event that occurred when she was professional education lead in an NHS trust in England. In this role she had been asked to support a nurse, who had been disciplined as a consequence of raising her Christian faith with an elderly patient and praying with her. She felt she had been responding to the spiritual needs of her patient but she was subject to a complaint by the family who saw the actions as inappropriate. Khan notes that she was caught in a situation where she could understand the conflicting and interconnecting perspectives of all key players, the patient, her family who had objected to the nurse's praying, the nurse herself, and the local NHS managers. Khan finds the process of reflecting on the incident as transformative in that it led her to have a greater awareness of the ethical dilemmas in clinical practice and more insight into her role offering professional support. Through this reflection she developed a deeper understanding and empathy with stakeholders.

In the second account, Rahman explains how, with colleagues, he developed a centre for supporting development and sustainability in Khulna, Bangladesh. The transformative learning principles of this centre were in sharp contrast to the controlling system of education that Rahman experienced in childhood. Schooling for him had been a process of rote learning, and random violence, noting that 'when the teachers frequently told me to answer questions in front of the class and I could not answer, they beat me, sometimes until I was bleeding, and motivated the class to laugh.' By trying to understand these experiences Rahman saw that education was the key to fulfilling his ambitions but it had to be a different kind of education. With colleagues he sought to develop an educational approach which was 'enjoyable, meaning-

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ful, comprehensible and manageable' and based upon a joint concern for social justice and a more human world.

Our third paper reports on research carried out by Kavanagh, Sexton, and Fitzsimons on middle leadership in post-primary schools in Ireland. This mixed methods study enabled the authors to present a picture of the opportunities and constraints which middle leaders experience. They show the competing demands made on middle leaders and challenges such as lack of time; heavy workload; the need for self-management; lack of good communication systems and dealing with colleagues. Taking on a middle leadership role involves a change in position in the structure of the school, changes in relationship with colleagues and a change of tasks to be undertaken. It is a vital role that mediates between senior management and teaching staff. It is a particularly challenging role too and it is easy to become overwhelmed by workload demands or uneasy about new relationships with colleagues, particularly in the period following appointment. It is, however, possible to meet these challenges by well-timed support and mentoring, as one participant in the study put it, 'a couple of days training cannot prepare you for the role and you require constant support from senior management'. Kavanagh, Sexton, and Fitzsimons found carrying out the research had been transformative in that they had an enhanced understanding of middle leaders' work and were able to use this new knowledge to reframe their support for middle leaders and their work in professional development in general. The study had led them to understand the value of challenging 'old notions' and ways of doing things.

In the fourth article, O'Connor presents a transformative story of working with former offenders. He introduces himself as a former offender himself, having experienced imprisonment in 2002. This was followed by ten years working as a tutor and mentor leading alternative pre-employment/education programmes for ex-offenders and drug and alcohol service users. The research reported in this paper concerns his work with former offenders, all volunteer participants, with a history of substance misuse. Over a three-to-four-year period, he would meet volunteer participants, take part in one-to-one mentoring and coordinate group outings. There was no pre-planned questions or schedules and this allowed volunteers to express themselves openly and shine a light on pivotal moments which would not have been picked up otherwise. As O'Connor notes 'It was vital that they conversed, communicated, and acted authentically, passionately, and with conviction'. The context was not straightforward as volunteers' journeys were not predictable but the challenges of researching ex-offenders were to be embraced.

The paper describes a hunger for learning that that could help volunteers to understand how they had arrived at their present situations. Their life goals were expressed simply as to live contentedly and to feel happy, fulfilled, joyous, and proud of the personal steps they took. Herein, a working definition of transformative learning.

I hope you enjoy these papers and invite further debate; what does transformative research mean for you?

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