This study reports on the establishment of a research group, with five teacher researchers, for the purpose of exploring ways of translating a commitment towards teaching mathematics for social justice into related classroom practice. There are many constraints faced by teachers involved in curriculum innovation, including scarcity of available time and energy, due to heavy workloads, and pressure to get through schemes of work. Increased levels of monitoring and scrutiny, together with regular testing, promote ‘low-risk’ teaching strategies, and discourage innovative practice, for fear of hindering students’ performance.

The focus of this study is the extent to which the format and operation of the research group, alongside a participatory action research model, impact upon classroom practice.

Seven meetings, facilitated by me, were held over the course of a year, focusing on raising awareness in the group of issues related to the research, then planning and evaluating classroom interventions as part of three participatory action research cycles. Audio-recordings were made of these meetings and three semi-structured empathetic interviews conducted with each teacher researcher. This data was supplemented by student surveys designed and administered by the teacher researchers themselves.

The aim of my research is to challenge the current situation and to bring about change. I draw upon a critical paradigm to argue that my role, as university-based researcher, in instigating and facilitating the inquiry, is vital to ensure it is transformational. I reject any pretence that this project, in common with other research, can be truly impartial or objective. I argue that such a stance is compatible with grounded theory methods, which I draw upon for my analytical framework. Through a process of interpreting, identifying themes and constructing meaning from the data, I narrate the stories of the five teacher researchers.

Initial findings from the project suggest that the collaborative and participative nature of the research group proved emancipatory and empowered teacher researchers to overcome many of the constraints described above. The research project promoted the self-efficacy of teacher researchers in addressing issues of social justice in their mathematics classrooms and strengthened their belief in the legitimacy of their endeavours. There was evidence that the processes involved in the participatory action research design enabled teachers to develop agency amongst students, raise levels of engagement with mathematics and build an appreciation of how mathematics can serve as a tool to understand the world.